

AFTER THE WAR

MERRY
FARMER
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NEVER
JUDGE
A
DUKE
BY HIS
LOVER

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MERRY
FARMER

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About the Author

Lord Anthony Wodehouse, Duke of Malton, wanted to be home at Wodehouse Abbey in the peace and tranquility of the coastal Yorkshire countryside more than anything in the world. And at the same time, he was dreading it. He adored the rolling hills and gorgeous sea vistas of his estate and the land around it, and he'd spent nearly every night while cooped up in stuffy, stinking, lonely London dreaming of the land he loved. His mind often wandered off during Parliamentary sessions to wonder how the Abbey's gardens were faring and if the blooms this year were as full and beautiful as the ones from his childhood. He spent the interminable hours of the *ton* parties he never failed to be invited to imagining his beloved children, Francis and Elizabeth, being tucked into bed by their nursemaid and wishing he were there to assist. But now that he was almost home, his chest felt heavy with the worry that the place he had been dreaming of for months wouldn't be the haven of peace and solitude that he'd been craving.

"We should revisit the weekly purchase of provisions straight away, Your Grace," Anthony's valet and man of business, Winters, told him as the carriage that had met them at the port in Hull rattled over the last mile of countryside approaching Wodehouse Abbey. "The last letter your brother, Lord Beverly, sent indicated that he and his friends were eating their way through the current level of purchases in half the time those provisions were expected to last."

"Redmond has always had an appetite," Anthony commented absently as he glanced out the carriage's window. It was late in the afternoon, almost suppertime, and Anthony's patience for traveling had grown thin. He craned his neck to better see the old Henshaw house as they passed it. The most recent letter he'd received from his land steward, Mr. Shelton, had contained a line reporting that the tutor Anthony had hired for Francis and Eliza, Mr. Adam Seymour, was on the verge of letting the place from old Mrs. Henshaw so that he could open a charity school. Anthony had yet to quiz Mr. Seymour about his plans—or about the continued education of his children—but he was highly interested in what the young man had planned.

As if Winters could sense his thoughts, he said, "You may want to

consider searching for a new tutor for Lord Francis while you are home, Your Grace. If this plan of Mr. Seymour's comes to fruition."

Anthony nodded, trying to pull his attention back into the carriage to Winters, but finding too many things he wanted to feast his eyes on rolling past them—the trees of the small woods on the property, the roof of the orangery that was visible on the other side of the rose garden, and the glistening waters of the lake. "I hope for the young man's sake that his school is a success," he said.

"Your Grace?" Winters said with a good deal of surprise.

Anthony turned to Winters and shrugged. "Who am I to hold back a man's ambition if he feels the call of duty elsewhere?"

Winters replied with a small, scoffing laugh. "You are the Duke of Malton, Your Grace. Your word is law within the bounds of this estate and, I dare say, quite a way beyond it as well."

Anthony shrugged again and returned to taking in the familiar landscape of his home as the carriage turned to make its way up the long drive. "I have no wish to be one of those dukes who feels it is his right to behave as a tyrant towards his dependents and neighbors," he said. "I take my duty toward my family, my tenants, and my friends very seriously, but I will not be a cause of misery for any of them."

"How very noble of you, Your Grace," Winters said with an approving smile. That smile melted back into business a moment later as the man shuffled the stack of papers and letters they'd fetched from the post office in Hull before departing for home. "Now, Your Grace, there is the matter of the industrialist who wishes to purchase a portion of Wodehouse Abbey on which to build a small factory to consider."

Anthony screwed up his face for a moment before steadying it into an expression worthy of his title. "I am not inclined to divide the estate," he said. "For any reason or for any price."

"As you wish, Your Grace." Winters nodded. "All the same, Mr. Haight has indicated he will be sending his land agent to speak with you regarding different contingencies for any possible sale, and he expects to be able to make a solid offer as well."

Anthony merely grunted at that information. He had no interest in selling any of his land, but an infusion of capital would go a long way toward helping with the improvements he needed to make to both the tenants' houses and the farming equipment they needed to increase production.

Winters cleared his throat and went on. "There is the issue of this letter from your aunt, Lady Grosmont, to consider, Your Grace," he said, sending Anthony a sheepish, sideways look.

Anthony pursed his lips and frowned as he stared out the window. The Abbey's manor house had just come into view, and all he wanted

to do was feast his eyes on its calming stone façade and the mishmash of conflicting architectural styles that made the place up, thanks to various of his forebearers deciding to add to the existing structure. He knew what his Aunt Georgiana had to say. She'd been saying the same thing for just under eight years, ever since the proper mourning period for Charlotte had ended.

"Would you like for me to read her correspondence aloud, Your Grace?" Winters offered cautiously.

Anthony sighed and turned a doleful eye to the man. "Dear Anthony," he recited, even though he hadn't read so much as a scrap of the letter as of yet. "You have waited long enough. It is time you find yourself a suitable new bride to play the role of replacement duchess."

Winters winced in sympathy and refolded the letter he'd opened and prepared to read. "Yes, well," he said, tucking the letter back into the pile. That was all that needed to be said. "Perhaps we should discuss ongoing accommodations for your brother Redmond's friends?" he suggested.

Anthony's chest constricted all over again, even as the carriage made the final turn that would take it along the looping drive that stretched in front of the house. Redmond's rowdy navy friends were the reason he was dreading what should have been a relief. Returning to his beloved home was one thing. Returning to a home that was overrun with loud, brash, uncouth sailors was another entirely.

"I have been under the impression that Redmond had all of his friends accommodated already," Anthony said, rubbing a tired hand over his face. "They've been given an entire wing of the house, have they not?"

"They have, Your Grace," Winters said with a nod. "But the final letter you received from your brother before departing for home indicated that only half of the expected visitors had arrived, the officers from *HMS Majesty*, and that the officers from *HMS Hawk* would be joining them shortly. He believes they will need more space than the second floor of the east wing."

Anthony frowned, but forced himself to sit straighter and face the problem like the gentleman he was. Redmond was the baby of the family and, if it was polite to say such things, his favorite. He not only felt as though it were his duty to accommodate Red as he transitioned from his naval service to a life after the war, but that he had a duty to the former officers of His Majesty's Navy to thank them for their years of service against Bonaparte. But the idea of strangers in his house made him vaguely ill.

The carriage rocked to a halt in front of the house's grand front doors, giving Anthony a moment to think before addressing Winters's

concerns about moving guests around his house. One of the primary reasons he detested London and the *ton* was because he had never felt comfortable in society. If he was truly honest with himself, he'd never felt comfortable in his own skin. It didn't matter how he dressed that skin up—in expertly-tailored jackets, fine linen shirts, or Hessian boots—or what parties he took it to, Anthony felt as though he were playing the role of duke instead of actually being one. If he'd had his way, he would have been born a country squire with a farm to manage and nothing more. Duty and responsibility he could understand. All of the trappings of title and position were a mystery to him. The only time he felt like he could breathe was when he was rambling over the moors and through the carefully-planted woods on his property, or when he was organizing improvements to said property and the lives of its dependents.

"Move the sailors to the north wing," he sighed at last as Winters stepped down from the carriage behind him.

"The family wing, Your Grace?" Winters asked with a questioning look.

Anthony shrugged. "It's the largest wing. The hallway below the family rooms should be sufficient." He started to stride forward to the stairs leading into his beloved home, but stopped. "If they truly wish to be moved. Perhaps Red was exaggerating the concern for some reason."

"Very good, Your Grace," Winters said with a nod. He spotted the Abbey's butler, Worthington, as the brilliant man opened the door to welcome his master home and instantly launched into, "Ah, Worthington, good to see you again. We have so much to discuss."

"It is good to see you again as well, Mr. Winters," Worthington greeted him after a perfect bow for Anthony. Anthony caught a hint of frustration from Worthington at Winters's over-eagerness in addressing him before Worthington had a chance to properly greet his master, but the slip was low on the list of things Anthony was concerned about at that moment. "Your children are playing in the garden, Your Grace," Worthington immediately shared with Anthony the only information he truly wanted to know.

"Thank you, Worthington." Anthony smiled at the man, handing off his traveling hat and gloves, then immediately striding down the central hall of the Abbey to the door that would take him right out into the garden.

For the first time in months, his heart felt light and a natural smile graced his features. In the sea of duty and obligation that dogged his life, there were only two people that truly mattered to him, Francis and Eliza. He'd missed them as he would have missed the air in his lungs had he dove deep into the sea, and now they would finally be

reunited. He'd longed for the moment from the day he left, had soothed himself with images of opening his arms and having his children come running to him.

They were there in the garden. He spotted them the moment he stepped out into the balmy sunshine, their faces full of joy, their cheeks pink, and their eyes bright. They were every bit as beautiful as they'd been when he'd left them...and they didn't even come close to noticing that he'd arrived. They were too busy laughing and dashing about in pursuit of a gorgeous, smiling man who Anthony had never seen before.

BARRETT LANDERS, Viscount Beverly, laughed and wheeled about as he played with the children of the house where he was spending the summer, thanks to his friend and fellow shipmate, Redmond Wodehouse. There were few things Barrett liked more than leisure, the Abbey had turned out to be the perfect spot to convalesce after a long war, and Lord Francis and Lady Eliza were the perfect companions when his friends were off on their own business. He dashed around the lawn, keeping the ball he held out of both Francis and Eliza's reach. "You're going to have to do better than that," he told the little scamps as he pivoted to one side, miming as though he would throw the ball into a particularly thorny rose bush.

"No!" Eliza shouted, then proceeded to dissolve into giggles and chase after him when he darted the other way.

"I'll get you," Francis called out, gasping with laughter as the three of them continued their game of chase-ball. It was yet another game that he and Red had made up since arriving at Wodehouse Abbey over a fortnight ago, another game that didn't make a lick of sense, but was excessively diverting to play.

"You'll have to be much faster if you want to catch me," Barrett laughed, but deliberately slowed down so that the children would think they stood a chance of getting the ball back.

As it turned out, he was a little too slow and Francis was a bit too exuberant. The boy launched himself at Barrett, slamming into him hard enough to send them both flying. Barrett let out a surprised shout as he and Francis thumped to the grass. The ball flew out of his hands, but Eliza was quick to retrieve it. She wasn't content simply to claim it, though. In the most unladylike manner imaginable, she ran back to the pile that was Barrett and Francis and flopped on top of them, laughing like a fiend.

Barrett loved it. He loved every moment of it. Never would he have imagined that two half-wild children would become the center of his universe during a summer house party that was meant to serve as a buffer between his naval service and the rest of his life. The simple

truth was that the children and the clean, country air of Yorkshire were all the life he needed, and the dull, depressing duty he was expected to sacrifice the rest of his life to was an utter nightmare.

"I won," Eliza declared in triumph, rolling so that she sat straight and tall, her bony backside unfortunately crushing Barrett's stomach. "The ball is mine."

"Not if I get it away from you," Barrett said, his voice strangled due to lack of air, since Francis was splayed across his chest.

Barrett half-heartedly snatched at the ball as Eliza held it away from him, laughing the whole time. He dared anyone in Christendom to find a joy greater than wiling away an afternoon playing with children. Although there was another activity that he enjoyed more, but certainly not having anything to do with children. Simple games were vastly preferable to all of the nattering letters from his family that he'd received since leaving the navy—letters exhorting him to return home or go to London and take up his duties as a viscount. He would rather have been assigned to guard Bonaparte on St. Helena than swan about at balls, pretending he was an eligible bachelor, or attending Parliamentary sessions. Since arriving at Wodehouse Abbey, Francis and Eliza had become his sole responsibility and his constant companions, and he would be damned if anyone—

"Papa!" Francis's ear-splitting shriek cut right through Barrett's thoughts, and a moment later, the weight that had pressed on him, making it impossible to breathe vanished.

"Papa, you're home!" Eliza gasped, abandoning the ball and tearing across the lawn to the tall, stately, frowning figure that stood just outside of the doorway leading into the house.

Barrett's heart lurched far harder than he ever would have expected it to, and for several reasons. He propped himself on his elbows and stared at the new arrival. Anthony Wodehouse, Duke of Malton, was a feast for the eyes, that much was certain. He had the regal bearing of a man of his class combined with an obvious fitness that had Barrett thanking God and Beau Brummel that the current fashion was for breeches to be extremely tight. His Grace had nothing at all to be ashamed of. But at the same time, Barrett was immediately hit by the strange thought that the man's clothes didn't fit quite right. It was an absurd thought, considering even a bumpkin could see they were of the finest quality.

"Papa, we've missed you so much," Francis said, throwing his arms around his sire and hugging him close.

"You mustn't stay away for so long," Eliza scolded him, squeezing tightly against him as well.

"I shall inform Parliament that you disapprove of how long it stays in session at once, my dear," Malton said, kissing his daughter's head,

then ruffling his son's hair.

Barrett blinked, smiling in spite of the twist of jealousy that pinched him. He couldn't think of many noblemen, let alone dukes, who were so open and affectionate with their children. His own father, an earl, certainly wouldn't dream of lavishing that sort of affection on him or his brother, Henry, or sister, Sophia. That bit of affection was almost, but not quite, enough for Barrett to forgive the gorgeous, imperious man for bursting into the idyllic bubble he'd created for himself in the last two weeks and stealing away the only thing that made him feel like he had a sense of purpose.

It was a ridiculously maudlin thought, and as he pushed himself to stand, Barrett shook his head at himself. Yes, he loved the children, but they were Malton's not his own.

"Papa, you must meet Barrett," Eliza said, grasping Malton's hand and dragging him across the lawn to Barrett as though presenting a prize.

"He is our friend," Francis added, tugging Malton's other hand.

All things considered, it was one of the more awkward ways to be introduced to a duke and his host for the summer. Barrett had discarded his jacket and waistcoat earlier in the game, and his shirt and breeches were now covered with green stains. He brushed a hand through his hair and came away with strands of grass. He didn't even want to think about how red and sweaty he was from running around for the last hour.

In contrast, Malton was perfectly put-together, but for that strange sense Barrett had that his expensive clothes were wrong on him. "How do you do?" Malton greeted Barrett with a perfectly executed bow. "I take it you are a friend of my brother's? Lord...Barrett?"

Barrett returned the bow as nicely as he could in his current state of dishabille. He couldn't hide the guilty grin that tugged at his mouth as he faced Malton either. "I am," he answered, extending a hand. "Though it's Lord Copeland. Barrett is my given name."

Malton reached politely to shake Barrett's hand but froze when their palms were joined. "My children call you by your given name?"

There was a charge in the way Barrett's hand felt enclosed in Malton's. They were of a similar height and size, though Barrett would have wagered he had more muscle than the duke, having spent the last four years of his life aboard a ship, but the noble presence Malton embodied made Barrett feel as though he were at the duke's mercy.

He didn't entirely mind the feeling either.

"Barrett told us to call him that," Francis said, glancing up at his father as though he would argue.

Barrett grinned from ear to ear as he glanced between Francis and Malton. He suddenly understood where both children got their

authoritative streak. Malton looked as if he could order the sea to part, should he need to walk to Denmark.

"I am not certain that is proper," he told his children, his expression unreadable as he studied Barrett. "You will refer to him as Lord Copeland from now on."

"But Papa," Eliza sighed. "How will I ever remember that after calling him Barrett for so very long?"

Barrett's mouth twitched into a grin. He shared it with Malton in a way that suggested the two of them were in on a joke together. Malton's eyes flashed with something for a moment and a hint of color came to his cheeks, making him devilishly attractive, but he straightened his back and drew in a breath as though he would naysay the whole thing and throw a wet blanket on the fun.

Before Malton could say a word, however, Worthington stepped out into the garden and said, "Lord Copeland, you've received a letter."

Barrett's brow flew up. He'd specifically told every family member he had not to write to him for at least another month so that he could have a moment's peace. It seemed someone hadn't listened.

"If you will excuse me, Your Grace." He nodded to Malton, then marched up to meet Worthington and retrieve his letter, wondering what new misery his family was attempting to heap on him now.

Barrett stepped into the house as he opened his letter from home, knowing he would need a moment alone to read it. He recognized his mother's handwriting and her seal, and he could already hear the reprimanding tone of her voice as he sped through the letter's opening lines. At least his mother had the courtesy to begin her letters with bits and pieces of the goings-on of Henry and his growing brood before starting in on all the ways Barrett was inadequate.

Sure enough, the middle part of her letter was all censure.

"Why you did not travel immediately to London to assist your sister with her season is unclear to me," his mother wrote. *"You know that Sophia was depending on you to introduce her to some of the finer gentlemen of the ton. To leave her with no one but your father's sister to guide her through the intricacies of the season was a gross dereliction of duty on your part and one I demand you make up for immediately. The only reason I am not already on my way to Yorkshire to drag you home by your ear is because it has come to my attention that you have well-placed friends. Ask them what they think of the way you have abandoned your sister in her hour of need, the way you refuse to attend to your duties in town, and the fact that you have not even tried to learn the finer points of managing your father's estate, which you will be bound to do one day, and I am certain they will agree with me."*

Barrett sighed. He scanned the rest of the letter and found more of the same. He would force himself to read about all the ways his mother believed him to be a disappointment later. The worst of it was that Barrett knew full well none of the things his mother dreamed of for him would ever come to fruition.

He headed down the hall to the stairs that would take him up to his guestroom so that he might bathe and prepare for supper, since the hour was growing late. Along the way, he crossed paths with Red.

"I hear Anthony has arrived at last," Red said, striding down the hall at a clip, a broad smile on his face.

"Yes, he was with the children in the garden just a moment ago," Barrett said, pivoting so that he continued to face Red as the man charged past. "I'm afraid I didn't make the best first impression."

Red skidded to a stop and turned to face him. "What? No! We

cannot have that. I'll be certain to put in a good word for you and assure Anthony that you are the very best of men."

Barrett laughed as both he and Red continued on their ways. Barrett's thoughts flew back to Malton as he headed up to his room. He'd rather think about the handsome duke than the pressures of his family, that much was certain. Malton bore a resemblance to Red, but Barrett's first impression was that the two men were as different as chalk and cheese. Red had always been lively and mischievous, especially when he combined forces with their friend Lucas Salterford from the *Hawk*. Malton seemed more subdued, sterner. Of course, that was entirely to be expected from a duke with the sort of responsibilities Malton had.

And yet, as Barrett reached his room and peeled off his grass-stained shirt so that he could run a sponge over his shoulders, chest, and back, he reflected that there was something more to Malton than the crusty, duty-bound noblemen he was used to dealing with—or rather, used to avoiding dealing with. Malton hadn't had a hair or a thread out of place on his person, and yet everything about him seemed...off somehow.

There was only one thing for it but to find out more about the man. The idea put a smile on Barrett's face as he continued bathing. Thoughts of the new arrival and master of the house affected a bit more than his face, as he was forced to admit as he stripped out of his breeches. He laughed at himself for getting half hard at the thought of the serious duke, but his body had reacted in far stronger ways with less to go on before. As far as Barrett was concerned, there was nothing at all wrong with reacting to a fit body and a kind face, even if he had the feeling Malton didn't entirely approve of him. Plenty of people didn't approve of him.

He would have done something about the stirring in his groin that Malton inspired if supper weren't imminent. With a cheeky promise to himself that he would indulge in a good wank while thinking about the duke later that night, he dried off, applied his special mixture of scent to all the places that mattered, and dressed in a manner that even his mother would approve of before heading downstairs to join the rest of the house for supper.

"Are the children not dining with us?" he asked as soon as he stepped into the dining room and found only Malton, Red, Septimus, and Adam taking seats around the table.

Malton blinked at him. "Why would children join adults for supper when they can be served more comfortably in their nursery?"

Barrett opened his mouth to protest, but before he could, Red stepped in with, "Francis and Eliza have taken to eating down here with us." He shrugged a bit sheepishly, as though he knew the

arrangements they'd had were entirely mad.

Malton stared at his brother for a moment before taking his seat at the head of the table. "I will amend my instructions to Ivy on the morrow to allow for them to continue eating supper in the dining room, then."

Barrett's brow flew up at the quick and reasonable way Malton had acquiesced to the unprecedented habits they'd all formed in the last few weeks. Perhaps the man wasn't as much of a stick in the mud obsessed with protocol and rules as his own family was.

"So tell us all about Parliament," Red said, his mouth already full of their first course, as though they were still dining aboard their ship instead of seated around a mahogany table with crystal drinkware, porcelain plates, and silver utensils. "What are those powdered wigs getting up to without a war to debate day and night?"

Malton carefully finished his first bite before turning to address his brother. "Quite a bit of business in this last session was concerned with the aftermath of the war," he began.

Barrett listened to the man with rapt attention throughout the entire meal, though he barely heard a word he said. It wasn't so much the dull ins and outs of reestablishing trade deals and making certain treaties were abided by that interested him. Malton had a beautiful, tenor voice, and he spoke with authority and confidence. And yet, as lovely as the timbre of his voice was, Barrett had a hard time imagining the man singing. Orating, yes, but there was something almost colorless about the Duke of Malton. In spite of the flash Barrett had seen in the man's eyes for a moment in the garden when their hands were joined, there was something lifeless and unhappy about the duke. Perhaps he was thinking about his children upstairs, as Barrett was. Conversation just wasn't the same without Eliza's quick-witted additions or Francis's incessant questions.

"Now that I am home for the foreseeable future," Malton said, though when he had changed topics of conversation, Barrett wasn't certain, "I am eager to see to the implementation of a few new farming techniques that I've read about over the past few months."

"Such as?" Red asked.

"Drainage, for one," Malton went on. "We could easily increase the amount of arable land and therefore increase crop yields by reconfiguring fields to provide for better drainage."

Barrett smiled in spite of the topic. How was it that a man like Malton could make the very same things that felt like shackles around his legs, the very duties that had caused him to run off and join the navy against his father's wishes, so very fascinating? He suspected the fascination had nothing to do with estate matters and everything to do with the broadness of Malton's shoulders, the way his lips took on a

soft quality as he ate, and the light of interest and intelligence that touched his eyes as he spoke about an estate he clearly loved. Barrett almost envied the man for his interest in the things he himself was obligated to be interested in.

And yet, he could still sense that something wasn't completely settled with the man.

"It's as if he is wearing someone else's clothes," he commented to Red later as the two of them made their way upstairs to retire for the night.

Red flinched and stared at Barrett as if he'd grown another head. "Whatever do you mean by that?" he laughed, then continued up to the hall. "I have it on good authority that Anthony's entire wardrobe is crafted by one of the finest tailors in London, and that he spends more kitting himself out than some men earn in a year."

Barrett blinked right back at Red with just as much surprise. "Your brother doesn't strike me as the sort who cares a whit about clothing."

"He doesn't," Red said with a shrug. "He just believes there are certain things a duke must do, certain ways he must dress and deport himself. He takes his dukeing very seriously," he added with a mock solemn nod.

Barrett hummed and nodded as though he understood. "So your brother is that type, is he? A slave to duty?"

Red laughed at the characterization. "Yes, I think that description fits Anthony perfectly."

"It's a shame he's so unhappy," Barrett said as they strode down the hall.

Red looked surprised at that. "He's not unhappy. At least, I don't think he is."

"Don't you?" Barrett asked, wondering if he'd read the signs wrong.

"No, I—" Red paused, tilting his head to one side. He made a thoughtful sound. "You know, I'd never really considered it. Anthony is just Anthony. He is the master of all he surveys. He's a duke's duke, managing this estate and the family's property in London as efficiently and effectively as he manages peers in the House of Lords."

"Why did he never marry after his wife died?" Barrett asked.

Red shrugged. "He has Francis, so he never had to. I always assumed it was because he was too tied up in the business of the estate and Parliament."

"You don't suppose he's...." Barrett ended his query with a significant look that Red would understand.

"Like us?" Red filled in for him with a broad grin. He laughed and thumped Barrett on the shoulder. "Imagine. Barrett Landers, sweet on my brother."

"I'm not sweet on anyone." Barrett laughed the idea off. "He isn't horrible to look at, though."

Red made a disgusted noise and pulled away. "With that, I am off to Bedfordshire, my friend."

"Sleep well," Barrett laughed.

Sleeping well was his plan as well, but it proved impossible. Even after he'd enjoyed the wank he'd promised himself. It was probably wicked of him to picture the Duke of Malton in a state of undress as he manhandled himself, since Malton was kind enough to let Barrett stay under his roof for the summer, but he didn't care. His curiosity was piqued, and once that happened, Barrett was loath to give up until he was satisfied. Besides which, any man who could produce two children as lovely as Francis and Eliza was the sort of man Barrett wanted to know more about.

Of course, those children, who had been the focus of all of Barrett's free time for the last few weeks, would want to be with their papa more than their new friend when the new day dawned. That left Barrett even more adrift as he made his way downstairs for breakfast in the morning, not a single clue what he would do with himself for the rest of the day.

"Barrett!" Francis's sharp squeal met him as he slogged his way down to the front hallway, immediately improving his spirits. Eliza was there as well, dressed to spend time outside instead of in Adam's schoolroom. "I was just going to tell Worthington to go fetch you."

Barrett burst into a smile in spite of the fact that Malton was standing in the foyer with a frown, as if waiting for something.

Malton cleared his throat, and Francis immediately corrected himself with, "I beg your pardon, Lord Copeland."

"Thank you," Malton told his son with an approving nod.

Francis glanced up at his father, grinning as though the man hung the stars and those two words of approval lit the sun.

Barrett suddenly found himself wondering what he could do to earn a heartfelt thank you from Malton. Every one of the ideas that sprang instantly to mind were entirely inappropriate to carry out around the children. He wasn't even certain Malton would welcome them.

"Your Grace," he nodded to Malton with all the gentlemanliness that he hadn't possessed the afternoon before.

"My lord," Malton greeted him, nodding in return.

It didn't fit. That was what was wrong with the man. Formality didn't come naturally to him. Barrett nearly sucked in a breath as he figured it out. Malton was only being polite and decorous because he felt as though that was what was expected of him, but it wasn't the man's natural state of being. Barrett could have sworn it. That was

why his fine clothes didn't seem comfortable and his stiff manners made him look distressed in spite of the command he possessed.

Excitement buzzed through Barrett as the realization took hold. His heart bounced around in his chest, as though he'd discovered buried treasure. Or, at least, he'd discovered a map that led to treasure. Now all he wanted to do was dig.

And beautifully, as if she could read his thoughts, Eliza handed him the shovel.

"We are about to go for a ride with Papa, and Francis and I think that you should come with us," she said.

"I told them you may very well have more important things to occupy your time than indulging in the wishes of children," Malton told him in a serious voice, looking vaguely unsettled.

"As it happens, I do not," Barrett said with a smile for both the children and their father. "Red informed me when we first arrived that I am on holiday for the summer, and that it would be inhospitable for me to think of anything but enjoying myself and being entertaining for our host."

In fact, Red hadn't said anything of the sort. At least, not directly. But Barrett was a thousand times more interested in spending the day getting to know his host better than he was snoring away in the library, attempting to read a book, or listening to Red go on about all the things he planned to do once Lucas and the others arrived.

"Excellent," Francis said, rushing forward to grab Barrett's hand and yank him toward the door. "I knew you would come with us."

"Are you quite certain this doesn't spoil your plans for the day?" Malton asked once the four of them were outside in the cheery morning sun.

A horse and two ponies were waiting for them on the drive, and once the stableman was informed that Barrett would be joining them, their group waited while the stableman rushed off to saddle one more horse.

"I have no plans for the day," Barrett told Malton with a smile. "I have no plans for the summer, as it happens. I'm not entirely certain I have plans for the rest of my life."

Malton balked at that answer. "None at all?"

"I have an aversion to plans," Barrett confided in him, standing perhaps a bit too close and addressing the duke too informally.

Malton still seemed flabbergasted. "But are you not a viscount, as my brother has informed me? And someday an earl?"

Barrett shrugged. "Those conditions do not require me to make plans. They exist, whether I plan for them or not."

Malton continued to stare at him in perplexed wonder.

"I am terribly sorry, Your Grace," Barrett said, his easy smile

punching a bit. "Have I upset you in some way?"

"No, not at all," Malton replied, shaking his head. He was clearly still puzzled, though. "It is just that I cannot remember a time when I did not have plans."

Barrett laughed out loud. "Spoken like the finest peer of the realm there is."

Their conversation was cut short as the stableman brought Primrose, the horse Barrett had grown accustomed to riding since his arrival at Wodehouse Abbey, around the corner of the house. He stepped forward to help the children mount their ponies along with Malton.

It wasn't lost on him that Malton continued to stare at Barrett when he thought Barrett wasn't looking, even when Barrett moved to mount Primrose. Perhaps particularly as he mounted. Knowing he was being watched, Barrett made as much of a show of it as he could, making certain all of his finest assets were on display. He had a hard time suppressing his grin as he noted the way Malton stared at his arse, and an even harder time when Malton realized he was staring, shook his head, and marched from where he'd just finished helping Eliza to find her seat over to his own horse, muttering something as he went.

Another piece of the puzzle that was the Duke of Malton fell into place. Not only was the man trying to be someone he wasn't, Barrett would have bet his title and fortune on the fact that the man needed a damn good tuppung as well.

With that handy piece of speculation in mind, their group of four set off across the estate along the path that wound across the entire, vast property in a circle.

"We always go riding with Papa when he's home," Francis explained, maneuvering his pony so that he rode by Barrett's side. "It's one of my favorite things."

"Mine as well," Eliza added, showing off a bit by trotting ahead of them, then breaking into a canter.

"I wish you would be more careful, darling," Malton called after her.

"Papa," Eliza called dismissively over her shoulder, shaking her head, "I ride all the time. Barrett—I mean, Lord Copeland—has gone riding with us several times since his arrival."

"Have you?" Malton asked, one eyebrow raised suspiciously.

"I am sorry if I have overstepped my bounds," Barrett apologized. "They are your children, after all, and I am an interloper."

Malton hesitated before saying, "Nonsense. You are my brother's friend and my guest. You are here by my consent, and I suppose it is a happy coincidence that you have such a fine rapport with the

children.”

Barrett couldn't help but smile and nearly burst out laughing at the overly fine way Malton said he approved of the situation. He rather felt as though he were pressing his luck, but he couldn't help but say, “You don't need to be so formal and duke-ish around me, you know. I'm just a rascal and a rogue intent on enjoying my holiday. I won't report any lapse in protocol to the authorities.”

“I...er...that is....” Malton's face went bright red as he stammered for a reply.

“And you, too, can call me Barrett,” Barrett finished in a conspiratorial whisper, leaning closer to Malton as they rode side by side.

“I'm not sure I could,” Malton said, not quite able to meet Barrett's eyes.

“You can, Papa,” Francis commented from Malton's other side. “Barrett says he doesn't mind.”

Barrett couldn't help but laugh at that. “Truly, I do not,” he said.

“Well...I suppose....” Malton failed to finish that sentence as well.

Barrett felt sorry for the man, who was so clearly out of his depth. He was handed the perfect opportunity to ease some of the tension that had descended on the duke a moment later as Eliza switched from cantering her pony to pushing it into a run.

“Oh, dear,” Barrett said, still smiling. “It would seem someone must keep an eye on Lady Eliza.”

He tapped his horse to run after the girl, fully intending to show off to the best of his ability as he did.

Anthony's heart leapt to his throat and stayed there as Barrett—he really should call the man Copeland, as he'd instructed his children to, but "Barrett" was stuck in his brain now—shot forward, leaning over his horse's neck.

"What is that bloody fool doing?" he hissed, gripping his reins tighter and tensing from head to toe.

Beside him, Francis gasped. "Papa, you aren't supposed to say bloody!"

Heat flushed Anthony's face as he turned to his son. "I am terribly sorry, Francis. It will not happen again."

His son, cheeky beggar that he was, giggled at him. "You shouldn't worry about Barrett, Papa. He is very good at galloping and jumping things."

"Jumping?" Anthony's otherwise sedate voice rose an octave, and he stared forward after Barrett, face still hot, heart still racing, though perhaps for different reasons that he couldn't put his finger on.

Indeed, Barrett had outpaced Eliza by a good bit and was now galloping across the grass as though Bonaparte's entire army were on his tail. And Francis was right, Barrett was an exceptional horseman. His lean, muscular body looked powerful and graceful as he straddled the horse, creating a beautiful line with the beast. The man really was attractive, not that Anthony cared for that sort of thing. Women probably found him irresistible. Anthony told himself that he was impressed with Barrett's prowess and the sure command he had over his mount.

A moment later, Anthony's heart dropped to his stomach as Barrett charged headlong toward a gate that separated the formal lawn from the wilder meadow and leapt right over it in a single, heart-stopping moment.

"Jesus," Anthony gasped, uncertain whether it was an oath or a prayer for Barrett's safety.

Francis burst into laughter for a second time. "Papa, I thought you said it would not happen again."

Blushing scarlet, Anthony peeked at his son, then cleared his throat. "We'd best catch up to them to make certain Lord Copeland is

uninjured.”

Before Francis could say something more, he tapped his horse into motion, trusting his son would follow, and headed after the wily and reckless Barrett.

“Did you see him, Papa? Did you see him?” Eliza called out to him as Anthony and Francis caught up to her at the far end of the lawn.

“I did,” Anthony told her with a stern nod, lest she think jumping horses was an activity he approved of for girls Eliza’s age. “Jumping is extraordinarily dangerous.”

“Not when Barrett does it,” Eliza said with a proud smile.

That smile inspired a twist of jealousy in Anthony. His children were supposed to think the world of him, not some irresponsible, daring, talented, handsome—

Anthony lost his train of thought as Barrett came galloping back toward them and jumped the gate a second time in the other direction. His landing was as accomplished and graceful as his vault, and Anthony found himself catching his breath, his heart thumping like the hooves of Barrett’s horse, as Barrett pulled his mount around, slowed, and approached the three of them at a saucy canter.

That canter slowed to a walk, then Barrett stopped altogether right in front of their group. As the children applauded and shouted their approval, Barrett executed a noble bow from atop his horse. Anthony applauded weakly as well, but he was more struck by the fact that Barrett was breathing heavily and a fine sheen of sweat had broken out on the man’s forehead, dampening his collar and neckcloth.

Anthony opened his mouth, intending to tell Barrett off for demonstrating something dangerous to his children, but the words that came out where, “How did you learn to jump like that?”

Barrett shrugged and guided his horse around to Anthony’s side so that the four of them could continue their ride along the path at a more sedate pace. “I had extensive riding lessons all through my childhood in Lincolnshire,” he explained, still slightly breathless.

Anthony was more than a little breathless himself, most likely out of lingering fear for the man’s safety. That had to be it.

“Father considered riding lessons one of the essential pillars of education for a viscount and future earl,” Barrett went on with a wink as they passed from the tamer, more formal section of the estate and out along the path that wound through the meadow.

“What were the other essential pillars?” Eliza asked, tapping her pony’s sides to ride a bit ahead of Barrett and Anthony, along with her brother.

“Dancing, of course,” Barrett told her.

Eliza and Francis laughed as though at a joke Anthony hadn’t heard. But of course the trio would have jokes with each other that

Anthony was not a part of. The realization ignited a sort of uncomfortable longing in him, but for what, he wasn't entirely certain. It wasn't as though he was in danger of losing his children's love, even if they had a new playmate.

"French, Greek, and Latin were a few others," Barrett continued.

"Greek *and* Latin?" Anthony lifted his brow at Barrett, impressed.

Barrett sent him a sheepish smile that settled awkwardly in Anthony. "My father was something of a classicist. He insisted on Greek and Latin, even though Mama thought they were useless languages."

"My father insisted I study them as well," Anthony rushed to say, no idea why he felt compelled to find that common ground with his guest. "But I haven't forced Francis or Eliza to learn them."

"Latin is boring," Francis said with exaggerated emotion.

A moment later, he and Eliza set off at a run, racing each other to the far end of the meadow. That left Anthony and Barrett to ride side by side, alone.

"Of course, the other pillar of my education, of the education of any young peer," Barrett went on, a touch of a sneer in his voice, "was the importance of doing my duty and being shackled to the responsibilities of the title that I never asked for, but had foisted upon me all the same."

Anthony reacted with such surprise that he was shocked he didn't fall off his horse. "Duty is our sacred responsibility as noblemen," he said, baffled that Barrett would believe otherwise. "We are born into privilege, yes, but that privilege is tempered by the duty to protect and provide for those who depend on us—not merely our families, though they are of utmost importance, but our tenants, and via our responsibilities as peers and members of the House of Lords, the nation."

Barrett winced slightly, as though aware he'd said the wrong thing. "I am terribly sorry that I have offended you, Your Grace."

"No, no, you have not offended me," Anthony rushed to say, perhaps a bit too fast. And why did it rankle him to have Barrett call him "Your Grace"? "It is just that I do not understand how one can be born with a sacred task to accomplish, and then turn ones back on said task."

"I'm not turning my back on it precisely," Barrett said, squirming a little in his saddle. "It's just that I don't feel up to the task, more often than not."

"Perhaps I could help?" Anthony offered, a tad too hastily again. He cleared his throat, tightened his stance, searched ahead for the children, then said, "That is, if you wish someone to advise you."

When he peeked at Barrett again, the man was grinning at him

with a warmth and boldness that made Anthony feel as though he had burrs in his saddle and his breeches had shrunk.

"The most recent duty I have shirked, according to the letter I received from my mother yesterday," he said, "was that I failed to take myself directly to London when the *Majesty* was decommissioned so that I could accompany my sister, Sophia, to various silly balls and throw her at men."

Anthony blinked at him, his jaw slackening. He knew precisely what Barrett was referring to. "You are her brother," he said. "It is, indeed, your responsibility to help the young woman find a suitable husband." He paused, his face heating as he wondered whether he'd overstepped his bounds as a friend—wondered whether he even had a right to call himself a friend when he and Barrett had only just met the day before. "How old is the young woman?"

"One-and-twenty," Barrett said with a shrug. "So it isn't a hopeless cause yet. From what I understand, she did quite well during the last season without me."

"Still," Anthony said, "you are her brother." In his heart, he wanted to argue the point more, but he didn't feel as though it were his right.

"And what about you?" Barrett asked with a laugh, fixing Anthony with a crafty look. "Why aren't you down in London, entertaining all of the fine ladies of the *ton* in a search for another duchess?"

Anthony was certain he turned as red as a stormy dawn at the impertinent question. It was one he was asked on a regular basis, one for which he didn't have a reasonable answer. "I am not inclined to remarry," he said avoiding Barrett's scrutinizing gaze as he spoke.

"Oh?" Barrett asked. "Not even to provide a mother for your children?"

"Francis and Eliza have done well enough without a mother," Anthony answered.

"Are you still mourning your deceased wife, then?"

Anthony writhed in his saddle. Barrett was shockingly impudent with his questions. And yet, he still answered. "Charlotte was a good and kind woman. I was very fond of her, but we were never as close as some couples I've known."

"You weren't?" Barrett asked. He didn't say it, but his tone implied, "Why not?"

Anthony shrugged, keeping his voice down as they rode a bit nearer to the children at the far end of the meadow. "We were perfectly friendly with each other, and I did mourn her genuinely when she passed, but ours was never the sort of romance that the poets and sages write about."

"Hmm." Barrett studied Anthony a bit too intently, far too much

cleverness lighting his eyes for Anthony's liking. It was almost as if Barrett knew something about him that he himself didn't know. "Why not seek out another duchess to have that sort of a romance for the ages, then?" he asked. "At least you'll have someone to warm your bed at night."

Anthony hadn't thought it was possible for him to feel more embarrassed or to blush any deeper, but he did. "To be quite honest," he said in a low mumble, darting a glance toward his children to make absolutely certain they were too far away to hear, "I never saw the appeal of bedsport the way that other men claim to."

"Really?" Barrett looked as though he were straining himself not to laugh at him.

Anthony let out a sharp sigh and dropped his shoulders. "Perhaps it is some deficit of my character, but I never really enjoyed it. Yes, the sensations were pleasant, but I simply never understood why so many men rave about it and would destroy their families and their reputations in pursuit of it." And if he were honest with himself, he'd never found any greater enjoyment of it with Charlotte than he had with his own hand. At least with his hand he'd been able to let his mind wander to whatever aroused him at the moment. Though he dare not let himself dwell on why imagining a particular footman employed by one of his London friends got him there faster than picturing the strikingly beautiful maid in that same household.

He shook himself when he realized the conversation had waned but Barrett was still studying him. He still had that sly, knowing grin on his shapely lips as well. The only thing he could think to do was to turn the tables on his new friend.

"And you, my lord," he began with formality, using it as a shield to hide behind. "Why have you not yet married?"

"Because I'd rather—" He stopped, as though he'd been about to say something devilish and possibly offensive. Instead, he cleared his throat, and though his grin was still cheeky, his words were tame. "Like you, I have no inclination to marry."

Anthony's brow shot up. "But are you not the heir to your father's earldom?"

Barrett shrugged. "I am, but if I fail to produce an heir, the title will pass to my brother and his progeny. Henry is far more suited to the role of earl than I am, so it would be a crime for me to take that honor away from him. Unlike me, Henry enjoys running the family estate with our father."

"But you are the eldest, are you not?" Anthony asked, shaking his head and shrugging.

"I am, but only by accident," Barrett told him. "I have other interests besides sitting in the House of Lords and managing my

father's estates." He winked at Anthony.

A hot shiver passed down Anthony's spine. He couldn't tell if Barrett was making fun of him or something else.

"Perhaps you will grow into your duty with age," he suggested, still unable to comprehend a man who had no interest in duty.

Barrett laughed. "I am already eight-and-twenty, and while I plan to live as long as my mother's uncle, Lord Barrett, after whom I was named, who is approaching his ninetieth year as we speak, I do not think I will grow any fonder of the duties that so many seem to want to dump on my shoulders than I am now."

Anthony hummed, studying Barrett with a confused frown. "It isn't all bad, you know," he said. "One can find quite a bit of satisfaction in carrying out one's duties."

"Just as one can find quite a bit of satisfaction in tugging away an afternoon, if one has the correct partner?" Barrett suggested.

Anthony gaped and sputtered, completely on the back foot as Barrett chuckled at him. His face burned hotter than ever, but worse than that, he had a sudden, imaginative flash of the way Barrett had looked stretched over his horse's neck when he'd been jumping, the way his breeches fit so tightly, and how his fit body might look without any clothes at all. The images were so startlingly incomprehensible that Anthony failed to regain his powers of speech, as much as he wanted to.

It was a blessing straight from heaven that the children had turned their ponies around and trotted back to them before the moment became any more embarrassing than it already was.

"We saw a fox," Francis reported, his eyes wide with awe.

"It was a mama fox too," Eliza added. "I'm certain I saw her babies following her."

"Do be careful around foxes, love," Barrett told Eliza, then peeked sideways at Anthony. "They're wilier than you think they are, and sometimes they bite."

There was no possible way that Barrett could have meant for those words to have a deeper meaning, but Anthony suddenly found himself in a delicate condition inappropriate for children's eyes. No matter how he adjusted his seat, he was wildly uncomfortable.

"We should head back to the house, then," he told his children, trying his best not to look at Barrett and only finding moderate success. "Particularly if there are wild creatures here in the meadow."

"There are wild creatures everywhere outside," Francis informed him in a practical voice as the four of them started back to the house. "Mr. Seymour has us ramble across the moors and down by the shore sometimes so that we can study them."

"I've become quite good at drawing creatures," Eliza boasted with

a smile.

"I should like to see some of your drawings," Anthony said. Determined focus on his children would keep his mind to wandering along strange and confusing paths that screamed of danger to him. "Perhaps Mr. Seymour will have returned from his errand in Hull by the time we reach the house and I could attend one of your magnificent lessons."

"Yes!" Francis gasped in delight. "Mr. Seymour is such a good teacher. I will be sad when he leaves us to open his school."

"But his school will be so lovely for all of the poor boys who would not be able to go to school otherwise," Eliza added.

Anthony smiled. It was thoughtful for Seymour to plant such charitable ideas in his children's heads so soon so that their eventual parting would be sweet instead of bitter.

"What do you think of Mr. Seymour's idea for a charity school?" he asked Barrett before he could pause to consider whether asking the man's opinion was too forward.

Barrett was all sunshine and smiles as usual. "I think it is an excellent idea," he said. "His plan is a solid one, and as long as he has Septimus's help, I am quite certain the two of them will make the place a success."

"Your friend, Mr. Bolton?" Anthony asked, still trying to learn the names and characters of all of his guests.

"Yes, that's him," Barrett smiled.

"Mr. Seymour and Mr. Bolton are in love," Eliza said as though pointing out that the roses in the garden were pink.

Anthony's mouth dropped open and a strange, writhing, prickling feeling filled him. He had no idea how to name that feeling, though. It should have been disapproval and condemnation, but it wasn't. Surely, Eliza had to have been mistaken. Children could be fanciful, after all. Seymour and Bolton were working together on the school. That would have explained their closeness.

Those thoughts all coalesced into the single syllable, "Oh."

He couldn't think of anything else to say. Worse still, Barrett seemed unwilling to help him correct Eliza's fanciful notion. Instead, he appeared to be concealing his laughter while gazing at Anthony with something brighter than humor in his eyes. It was enough to make Anthony believe a force he did not understand had invaded his world and stood poised on the verge of tipping the whole thing on its head.

"Look, there's Uncle Red," Eliza called out, standing in her stirrups and pointing ahead of them to the house.

"I'll race you to him," Francis said, then tapped his pony into motion.

“Children, do be careful,” Anthony called after them, then sent an apologetic look to Barrett.

Barrett was still smiling at him and regarding him as though he were a marzipan tart. Stranger still was the realization that Anthony didn’t mind the look one bit.

A week passed, and Anthony's restless confusion and sense of disquiet didn't leave him. If anything, it grew worse. With each passing day he spent at home, going over the household accounts with Winters or consulting with Shelton about the lands making up the estate or being a good host to his brother's friends, his uneasiness increased. It felt ridiculous. He was in his favorite place in all the earth with the people he loved the most, his brother and his children. He should feel at ease and infused with domestic peace.

To counteract the unsettled feeling, he threw himself into his work. It helped to dive into an overhaul of the household budget with Winters and Worthington, to increase the wages of the staff and to order new liveries and such for the footmen and maids. Reviewing the drainage situation and farming techniques of the tenants also filled Anthony with a sense that he was adequately carrying out his responsibilities. But being a good host to Red's friends was where things turned uncertain.

"Papa, you cannot leave us to visit the tenants today," Francis sighed just over a week after Anthony had returned home as the entire complement of residents and guests finished their breakfast. "It's raining, and besides which, it's Saturday. We don't have lessons on Saturdays."

"I will not melt if I go out in the rain," Anthony informed his children with a straight face but a smile in his heart as he stood from the table. Though perhaps there was something to be said for the moisture in the air due to the rain. That must have been what was causing his clothing not to fit right. He tugged at his jacket sleeve to straighten the garment, but there was nothing he could do to ease the uncomfortable fit of his breeches without appearing rude.

"You must stay and play with us this morning," Eliza insisted, dashing from her place at the table to take his hand and tug him toward the doorway to the hall.

Anthony couldn't help but catch the amused look on Barrett's face as he let Eliza lead him. His discomfort grew a thousandfold at the man's teasing smile, but there was nothing he could do about it short of shaking his children off. Francis had come to grab his other hand,

and between the two of them, they tugged Anthony into the hall and along to the conservatory. Barrett, Red, Bolton, and Seymour followed.

"If we must stay inside today, we should all play together," Francis insisted.

"I think it's a capital idea," Red agreed, elbowing Barrett as they entered the conservatory.

Anthony frowned at the gesture, but the only reason he could come up with for his disapproval was a vague sense that he didn't like his brother touching Barrett, which made no sense. It wasn't as though the man were a plague-carrier.

In fact, as Anthony had discovered in the past week, Barrett was fastidious about his health and grooming. The man took regular exercise every day, whether it was riding or walking or playing whatever new, ridiculous game he and Red had invented for the day. Through various conversations, some of which had lasted long into the night, Anthony had discovered which soaps and tooth powders Barrett preferred, as well learning a recipe involving lemon and alum that Barrett had discovered in his travels that one applied under the arms to stave off odor. Plague wouldn't have dared to go near Barrett, but Anthony found himself highly aware of the man's fresh, intoxicating scent. He told himself it was curiosity that caused him to inch closer to Barrett whenever they were in proximity so that he might discern what other exotic ingredients the man used on his person.

"Papa, are you paying attention?" Eliza asked, snapping Anthony out of his thoughts.

"Yes, yes, of course, my love," Anthony said, though it was an absolute falsehood. What he had been doing was staring at Barrett and remembering the excitement in the man's eyes when he'd offered to give Anthony a tour of his toiletries, which would have involved a trip to his guestroom. "Would you mind repeating what you just said?" he asked Eliza, heat rising to his cheeks.

"I said that we should play hide-and-seek," Eliza said, clearly put out with her father's lack of full attention. "I will start by counting to twenty, and the rest of you will find a place to hide in the conservatory."

"Just the conservatory?" Red asked, glancing around. "There aren't many places to hide in here."

"There are plenty of places," Francis contradicted him, leaping toward one side of the room where there was a modest closet containing sheet music for the piano and various smaller instruments for musical evenings.

Anthony grinned at his son, guessing who would be the first person

Eliza found once the game began. From there, he searched the room a bit himself. It wasn't an ideal space for grown men to play hide-and-seek—if grown men should even be playing hide-and-seek to begin with—but it would do.

"Perhaps you'd better count to thirty or higher to give those of us who are not used to such games a chance to truly hide," he told Eliza with a wink.

Eliza laughed. "Oh, Papa. You aren't very good at games, are you?"

For some reason, that comment had him glancing in Barrett's direction. His heart seemed to miss a beat for no reason when he found Barrett grinning at him, as though he agreed with Eliza.

"There isn't much call to play hide-and-seek in Westminster," he answered. "Though if there were, I can assure you that I would know all the best hiding places in the House of Lords' chambers."

That comment earned him a laugh from Barrett—and Red, Bolton, and Seymour, though he hardly noticed them—which left Anthony feeling as though he might actually be up to the game after all. Society had never been his forte—which likely explained why he was so uncomfortable playing host to Red's friends—but at that moment, he felt as though he were up to the task of host for a few.

"Whenever you are ready, my love," he told Eliza.

"I am ready," Eliza declared resolutely. She marched to a spot in the center of the large room, covered her eyes with her hands, and began counting, "One, two, three..."

There was something delightfully ridiculous about five grown men scattering around a conservatory as a ten-year-old girl counted. Francis leapt straight for the closet, as Anthony had predicted. Bolton took up a position behind the piano, which was utterly inadequate to hide his large frame. Seymour, who was much lither, dashed for a spot behind one of the sofas that stood near the wall.

Anthony didn't see where the others went. He was too busy bolting for one of the curtains framing the French doors that led out to the terrace. He chose the one at the far end of the room and quickly concealed himself behind it, but he wasn't alone.

Barrett dove behind the same curtain from the other side. The result was that the two of them ended up nearly knocking each other over with the haste of their movements. Anthony reached for Barrett to stop himself from spilling to the floor. Barrett had the same idea. Within a heartbeat, the two of them stood tangled up together behind the curtain, trying their very best to stand perfectly still so that they did not give away their position.

"...twenty-nine, thirty!" Eliza declared. "I'm going to find you all."

Anthony held his breath as his head spun. There was no need to lean closer to Barrett to inhale his scent, that scent was all around

him, infusing him and making him lightheaded. One of his arms was clamped around Barrett's side, which enabled him to feel the steady rise and fall of the man's extraordinarily firm chest as he breathed. Their thighs were pressed together as well, and everything Anthony had assumed about the strength and power in Barrett's legs seemed to be proven with the contact.

There was just enough light bleeding into their hiding place through the French doors for Anthony to see Barrett's expression fully. The man had a wild, hungry look in his eyes that sent shivers through Anthony's confused and rebellious body. That look alone was worth a thousand touches and was headier than any delicious scent. More alarming still, Barrett's gaze seemed to fall to Anthony's lips. The mad idea struck him that Barrett might kiss him. Maddier still, Anthony found himself wondering what that would feel like. No, not wondering, longing.

"Found you!" Eliza's call from the other side of the room was followed by Francis whining. A moment later, Bolton was heard exclaiming as Eliza found him as well, then Seymour.

Anthony hardly noted any of it. He had suddenly become aware that Barrett's hand had somehow found its way beneath the hem of his jacket and rested on the back of his hip. In fact, with a simple gesture, Barrett could be caressing his arse. That thought had Anthony breathing shallowly and breaking out in a sweat. It also had his cock stiffening in a way that would prove mortifying if he were to shift in the wrong way and press that part of himself against Barrett. Although, if he did make that gesture, he wondered what Barrett would think, what he would do.

That thought was blasted out of his mind a moment later as he glanced past Barrett's shoulder and saw Red concealed behind the curtain on the other side of the French door. Worse still, Red was obviously attempting not to laugh his head off as he studied the predicament Anthony was in. Red clearly thought he knew something Anthony didn't.

It was a godsend moments later when Eliza threw back the curtain where Red was hiding and declared, "Found you!" That meant that Anthony and Barrett were seconds away from being discovered themselves. Seconds was just enough time for the two of them to move apart so that they did not present an obscene tableau when Eliza threw back their curtain and shouted, "Found you!"

"Yes, you did," Barrett told her with a laugh, behaving as though nothing at all out of the ordinary had just happened and as if his and Anthony's breeches weren't obviously bulging.

Prickles broke out down Anthony's spine. Barrett had been aroused by their proximity too. It was incomprehensible.

“Let’s play again,” Francis said with a boyish pout. “I need to find a better hiding place.”

“We should play throughout the entire house,” Red suggested. “Now that’s a game of hide-and-seek.”

“The entire house?” Eliza asked, tilting her head to the side as she considered the idea. “Including the nursery upstairs and the kitchens downstairs?”

“Yes,” Red answered, sweeping her into his arms and kissing her cheek. “The entire house.”

“The last person to be caught gets to be the seeker,” Francis said with a puzzled frown, “but Papa and Barrett were caught at the same time.”

“Caught in the act, one might say,” Red added with a wink for his brother.

Anthony heated so quickly that he was certain his face was a beacon. Barrett, however, merely laughed as though the joke were on him.

“I’ll seek,” Barrett said, thumping a hand on Anthony’s shoulder. “That way, you can continue to hide.”

Anthony had a vague idea that he should be offended by the man’s jibe. He was still too mortified by his body’s state and the way his heart pounded to say anything, though.

“I’ll count all the way to one hundred,” Barrett went on, taking up the spot Eliza had occupied in the middle of the room. “One, two, three...”

For the second time, everyone scattered. Anthony was more than ready to leave the room. He had half a mind to dash out of the house, run down the front drive, and not to stop until he reached Cathay. Instead, he headed for his study—one of the few places where he still felt like himself.

As he reached the doorway, he realized that Red had followed him.

“I am certain there are plenty of other places to hide in the house,” Anthony told his brother once they stepped into the room.

“There are thousands of spots to hide in this house,” Red said, shutting the door behind them in a way Anthony found ominous. “The house was designed to hide people. Which probably explains why you’ve become so adept at hiding yourself.”

“I beg your pardon?” Anthony said, pacing to the far end of the room. He used the excuse of the game to search the room high and low instead of meeting his brother’s keen gaze.

“I could be coy about this and ease you into answering the questions I have,” Red said, stalking slowly across the room to Anthony, grinning as he did, “or I could be blunt and risk offending or upsetting you.”

Anthony stopped scanning the room and let out a sigh. He lowered his shoulders and faced his brother and whatever distasteful thing he could tell Red was about to say head-on. "You might as well just say it and spare us both the agony of figuring everything out."

"Very well then, if you insist," Red said, beaming as though he'd been handed a custard tart. "You fancy Barrett, don't you?"

Anthony's eyes went wide, and he snapped his back straight. "Certainly not. What sort of an accusation is that?" Inside, he withered as the truth pecked away at him.

"Come now," Red asked, as though he were the older brother and Anthony were the green fool. "You're not an idiot. You know that men can just as easily fancy men as they can women."

"I...I..." Words simply wouldn't form on Anthony's lips. He would look like an utter dolt if he pretended he didn't know what Red was talking about. Of course men fancied men sometimes. Anyone who had been to university knew that. But knowing something and taking the time to actually consider it were two entirely different things. And if he were honest with himself, it was something he'd purposely avoided for years. "I fail to see what this has to do with Lord Copeland."

Instead of laughing at him, as Anthony expected, Red sighed and shook his head. "Oh, Anthony," he said, sitting against the back of one leather-upholstered sofa in the center of the room. "I feel as though I have done you a great disservice by failing to discuss this subject with you before."

"Oh, God." Anthony rubbed his hands over his face. "What subject are we discussing?"

"Well, my dear brother," Red began, an impish glint in his eyes. "When a man loves another man very much—" He stopped and shook his head. "No, strike that. Love doesn't have to have anything to do with it. When a man finds his cock standing at full attention and his balls drawn up and aching at the sight or the thought of another fine man of his acquaintance—"

"I beg you to stop right there," Anthony said in a hoarse voice, his face and neck so hot he thought he could ignite the kindling in the room's fireplace.

Red laughed at him then. "You cannot hide it from me, Tony," he said, using the affectionate nickname he'd used with Anthony when he was a child. "You and Barrett are so randy for each other that you rival the flames between Septimus and Adam."

Anthony opened his mouth to protest, but it went slack and his eyes went wide. He dropped his shoulders farther, then continued to gape for a moment before saying, "So Eliza was right after all? Are Seymour and Bolton—" he lowered his voice to a whisper, "—lovers?"

“Don’t sound like such a prudish miss about it,” Red laughed. “And yes, they are. Happily so. And to return to my first point, it is obvious to the rest of us that you and Barrett are headed that way as well.”

“We are not,” Anthony protested, but he suddenly couldn’t stand still. His skin itched with the memory of being pressed against Barrett behind the curtain, and the scent of Barrett seemed to be in his nose again.

“Anthony,” Red said in a serious, caring tone. “There’s nothing wrong with it. Nothing at all. Frankly, I find the thought of you and Barrett as lovers to be endearing.”

Anthony felt as though he might crawl out of his skin. He paced across the room as if he needed to shut the door, but since Red had already shut it, there was nothing productive in the movement except movement itself.

“You cannot say such things,” he hissed to Red as he paced back to his brother.

“Would it help if I confessed I prefer cock to pussy myself?” Red offered.

Anthony froze, gaping at him. Of course, that made perfect sense. He’d never known Redmond to chase skirts, like their brother Bertram, or half his London friends. He had, however, known Red to spend a great deal of time with one of the stable boys in his formative years, and to rush off to join the navy.

Still, it was a bit too much for Anthony to comprehend in the moment. He sank to lean against the back of the sofa beside Red. “I am four-and-thirty, Red,” he said, looking mournfully into his brother’s eyes. “I have two children, an estate to manage, and a seat in the House of Lords to attend to. How could I have gone through so much of my life without knowing something so fundamental about myself?”

Red shrugged, sending Anthony a reassuring, brotherly smile and pressing his shoulder against Anthony’s. “Because of all those things you just mentioned,” he said. “You have always been the most responsible of all of us. You married Charlotte because you were supposed to, sired an heir because it was your duty, and you have managed to keep yourself so occupied that you have no time to think for all these years. And then I brought my friend home to stay.”

Anthony glanced to him in alarm. “To stay?”

Red laughed. “My, aren’t we getting ahead of ourselves.”

Anthony huffed an impatient breath and rubbed a hand over his face. “I cannot even say with certainty that I have those sorts of inclinations,” he confessed. “To be honest, desire has never been a factor in my life. I don’t understand what the appeal is.”

Red laughed and slapped Anthony’s back. “Then you’ve never

fucked or been fucked by the right person.”

Anthony sent him a withering look to mask his own feelings of mortification.

Red apparently saw that as an invitation to turn the screws tighter. “You should try both ways, you know. I myself have no strong preferences. It’s bliss to have your cock sheathed in a nice, tight hole while you thrust your way into oblivion, but it is also heaven to have a good, thick prick filling your arse, hitting that spot that makes you believe in miracles.”

“How dare you?” Anthony snapped, though what exactly he meant by his protest he didn’t know. He should be offended. That was the proper reaction. But instead, he burned with curiosity. Miracle spot? He’d never heard of such a thing. The idea of being impaled by another man’s cock had only ever seemed painful. And perhaps the tiniest bit alluring.

He shook his head and pushed away from the sofa. “I cannot consider any of this,” he said. “Lord Copeland is a guest in my house, and I will not importune him with this sort of speculation.”

“Barrett likes it both ways too,” Red told him with a sly grin.

Anthony’s stomach dropped to the level of his feet. “Have the two of you—”

“God, no!” Red rose from the back of the sofa and stepped closer to Anthony. “Barrett is like a brother to me. But, like a brother, we’ve shared certain escapades over the years.”

“I’ve never shared *escapades* with you,” Anthony said, eyeing his brother suspiciously.

“Which is a mistake I should have corrected a long time ago,” Red laughed, laying a hand on Anthony’s shoulder. “Perhaps if we’d shared these things sooner, you wouldn’t have that confused and bereft look that you have now. Perhaps you’d have taken Barrett to your bed when you first felt the tingle, and you’d be wearing a smile now instead of a frown.”

“I am not some sort of rake who beds whomever he feels like indiscriminately,” Anthony protested.

“Are you afraid you might get Barrett with child and be forced to marry him?” Red asked sardonically.

“No,” Anthony said, unwilling to fall for that trick, “I simply believe that it is imperative that one cares for the person one takes to bed.”

“Don’t you care for Barrett?” Red asked.

Damn. Anthony was caught in the trap after all. “I’ve barely known him a week,” he growled.

Red shrugged. “I’ve tumbled into bed with men I’ve known less than an hour. We enjoyed ourselves thoroughly, thanked each other

when we were done, and gone about our merry ways.”

“I am not like you,” Anthony said, scowling.

“You aren’t,” Red agreed. “But that doesn’t mean you aren’t in need of a damn good tugging with a partner who I know for a fact is more than willing to loosen up those clenched muscles of yours.”

Anthony’s mouth dropped open, and he was on the verge of telling his brother off for being vulgar when the study door flew open and Seymour popped his head inside.

“It seems the game has ended,” he announced. “Lady Eliza and Lord Francis attempted to hide in the kitchen and discovered Cook was making strawberry-rhubarb tarts. They have taken it upon themselves to assist.”

“Oh, dear,” Red laughed. “Poor Cook.”

“The rain has stopped, at least,” Seymour went on. “Septimus and I are going to walk down to the beach. You’re welcome to join us.”

“Thanks, Adam,” Red said.

Anthony studied the young tutor for a moment before the man nodded and ducked back into the hall, leaving the door open. There was nothing odd, deformed, or unsavory about the man. In fact, Anthony found him charming and intelligent. Knowing that he and Bolton were lovers changed absolutely nothing about how he viewed the man. Perhaps the same could be true for himself and no one would judge him if he...explored.

He shook the thought away with a scowl and headed for the door. “I think a walk is in order.”

“I’ll join you and we can continue our conversation,” Red said, starting after him.

“No.” Anthony stopped him as they reached the door. “I need to be alone. I have much to think about.”

For a moment, he thought Red might protest, but his brother nodded as though satisfied with the outcome of the situation and said, “If you have any further questions, I would be more than willing to answer them in whatever level of detail you’d like.”

Anthony hesitated, then said, “Thank you,” before turning and leaving the room. He was certain he would have an entire world’s worth of questions once he opened the Pandora’s Box in front of him. As things stood, he didn’t even know where to start.

Hide-and-seek was precisely the sort of game Barrett felt as though he'd been playing with Anthony for more than a week, and Anthony was a master at hiding. Barrett suspected the poor man had been hiding for his entire life.

"...ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred," he called out, finishing his count and opening his eyes.

The conservatory was empty, of course. Not even the children would be impatient enough to hide somewhere Barrett could catch them in a moment. With a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, he set off for the hall, asking himself where he would hide if he was Anthony Wodehouse. Because if there was one thing Barrett knew for certain, it was that after the blissful moments he and Anthony had spent wedged together behind the curtain, Anthony was the first and only person he intended to find, and once he did, they would pick up where they'd left off.

He made his way across the hall to the formal parlor and immediately checked behind those curtains. He and Anthony couldn't have been concealed together for more than a minute, but that minute had held revelations. Anthony was strong and fit for a man past thirty who spent so much of his time warming a bench in the House of Lords. The man had been so captivated staring into Barrett's eyes in their close quarters that he'd barely noticed the way Barrett had essentially manhandled him, brushing a hand across his side and slipping under his jacket in an attempt to grope a handful of his arse. It was shockingly forward of him, but their moment behind the curtain merely confirmed to Barrett that Anthony Wodehouse was in need of shockingly forward action to push him out of the rut he'd dug for himself.

"Hello?" he called into the parlor, checking behind the curtains one at a time. "I'm going to find you, you know. And once I do, you will be excessively grateful that you've been found."

A slight bump sounded from the far side of the room. Barrett's pulse shot up. He'd found Anthony quicker than he thought he might, which meant he had more time to enjoy the man.

"You cannot run from the truth forever, you know," he said in a

teasing voice as he crossed the room to the sound of the bump. "I felt it, you felt it, and now I do believe we should feel it together."

He heard a muffled sound of some sort from the other side of a cupboard door in the closet, and once he reached it, he threw the door open with a bright, triumphant smile.

"Ah h—oh." His disappointment shone clearly when he revealed Septimus hiding in the cupboard and not Anthony.

"Expecting someone else?" Septimus said with a teasing grin, stepping out into the opening and stretching. "I never would have hidden in there if I'd known it would be so damnably cramped."

Barrett let out a breath and rubbed a hand over his face. "I was hoping you were our august host," he admitted sheepishly.

Septimus sent him the wryest grin Barrett had ever seen. "Yes, I know," he said. "We all know. You have been sniffing around Malton like a cat in heat since the man returned home."

Barrett assumed a cocky stance and sent his friend a flat look. "I have not been that bad. I have not been any worse than you are chasing after Seymour's tail."

"Adam has a tail very much worth chasing after," Septimus said with a smug wink. "And I don't need to chase it anymore, because he's gladly handed it over to me."

Barrett hummed and shook his head. "Would that it were so easy to convince Malton to do the same."

To Barrett's surprise, Septimus barked a laugh. "That man has had his head turned so hard that he doesn't know which way to look anymore."

Barrett arched one eyebrow in a look that conveyed both doubt and hope. "You think so? Because as much as I enjoyed the moment the two of us just spent in hiding together and as close as I was to committing a cardinal sin and kissing the man, I have yet to be convinced that he would not scream bloody murder and call for the constable if I did."

Septimus flinched in confusion. "Why would he do that? He is clearly enamored of you. We can all see it."

"I can see it as well," Barrett sighed. "I can also see that his reticence and sense of propriety and decorum are holding him back from embracing what he wants."

Septimus nodded and rubbed his chin. "I see. He's like Rutherford, then."

"I beg your pardon?" Barrett blinked.

"Rutherford," Septimus repeated. "You remember. That lieutenant from the *Leviathan*?"

Barrett sucked in a breath as it all came back to him. Rutherford was a lovely, endearing young man who was so concerned with doing

everything right and earning the praise of his captain that he failed to notice that half the fleet would have dropped to their knees to suck him dry at any given moment. Red actually approached the young man with an offer after too much grog, and even though Rutherford had burst forth with a cockstand that could have served as a mainmast during a storm, he'd insisted he didn't know what Red was talking about and that his one and only concern was executing his duty toward his captain, the navy, and his king to the best of his abilities. Tragically, the young man had been killed in a skirmish with American privateers before anyone was able to coax him out of his rigid sense of propriety and into a night of fun.

Barrett shivered at the idea of Anthony going to his grave without ever experiencing what a part of him knew he wanted.

"Do you see why I detest this servitude toward duty that some men have?" he asked Septimus, pacing across the carpet in front of him. "Man was not meant to be an automaton whose only purpose is to grind away at the invented responsibilities he was born into."

"In all due fairness," Septimus said, crossing his arms and watching Barrett pace with an amused grin, "Malton's family and tenants are more than just invented responsibilities. From what Red says, he sees them as the sheep he has been entrusted to shepherd."

"But shouldn't the shepherd be allowed a bit of fun now and then?" Barrett demanded. "Do you know what he told me the other day?" He marched up to Septimus and lowered his voice to a whisper. "He said that he does not understand the appeal of bedsport, doesn't understand what all the fuss is."

Septimus's eyes went wide with mock horror. "Oh God."

Barrett nodded. "A phrase he has never had cause to utter in the throes of passion, apparently."

"And you wish to change that?" Septimus grinned broadly.

"Of course I wish to change that," Barrett said, still too frustrated with the half-life Anthony had lived to see the humor in the situation the way Septimus clearly was. "I was a hair's breadth away from changing it behind the curtain just now."

"That would have been inconvenient, considering the man's brother and children were in the room," Septimus said, his lips twitching as though he were trying not to laugh.

Barrett let out a breath and broke into laughter himself. He was being overly sensitive about the situation, but it was intolerable. It went beyond simply wanting to bed the man so that they could both have a little fun. His heart bled for the man and the narrowness of his life. He liked Anthony, quite a bit. It would be a terrible tragedy for the man to continue to live as he was. Once again, duty was doing its best to ruin everything.

Before the conversation could go on, Seymour stepped into the doorway.

"There you are," he said with a nod for Barrett and a fetching smile for Septimus. "I take it the game has been suspended?" He marched right over to Septimus and threw an arm boldly around Septimus's waist, lifting to his toes so he could steal a kiss.

Barrett's heart squeezed in his chest at the sight of his two friends being so openly affectionate with each other. What he wouldn't give to have that sort of an understanding with another man, with Anthony.

"Your paramour and I fell into conversation," he said, pretending he wasn't affected. "I confess I'd forgotten there was a game afoot at all."

"Yes, well, the children took themselves down to the kitchen to hide, and in the process, they discovered that Cook was making tarts for pudding tonight," Seymour said. "They've decided they would rather assist than continue hiding and seeking."

Barrett laughed. That was very much like Eliza and Francis. He wondered what Anthony would think of their mischief.

The speed with which his thoughts had flown to the Duke of Malton cinched Barrett's chest with longing.

"The rain has stopped," Seymour said, mostly to Septimus. "I was thinking a walk to the beach might be in order, as we've been cooped up for so long."

"I like it." Septimus leaned in to kiss Seymour fondly.

"Would you mind if I extended an invitation to the others?" Seymour asked.

"Not at all." Septimus kissed him again, and when Seymour turned to go, he goosed the young man hard enough to earn a yelp from Seymour.

Barrett watched him leave, then let out a heavy sigh. "You are an extraordinarily lucky man to have found such a free spirit," he said.

Septimus stepped over to him and thumped Barrett's back. "Be patient, Barrett. If Malton wants it the way you think he does, he'll come around eventually. I've never known the object of your desire to resist you for long."

Barrett laughed, but the comment brought heat to his face as the two of them headed into the hall. He had been quite a charmer in the navy. Perhaps his frustration now was because he'd never had to work particularly hard in the past to find himself a bedmate for the night. But then, he wasn't entirely certain he only wanted Anthony for one night. Surely it would take a fortnight or more for the interest he felt in the serious, dutiful man to run its course. He would have to have Anthony in a dozen different ways and be had by him as well before

he felt satisfied. Even then he wasn't certain—

His thoughts stopped abruptly as he and Septimus rounded a corner and Barrett nearly ran headlong into the object of his thoughts. In an instant, he stood as close to Anthony as he had behind the curtain. The suddenness of their meeting had caused both of them to reach out as if to steady the other, which resulted in their hands on each other once more.

But only for a moment.

"I beg your pardon," Anthony said, stepping to the side and keeping his eyes averted. His face flushed pink, though.

"There is nothing to beg," Barrett said, then failed to stop himself from adding, "unless that is the sort of thing you enjoy."

Anthony's eyes snapped to meet Barrett's. The alarm and temptation Barrett saw there brought up every naughty thought he'd ever had and more. He couldn't help but fix Anthony with a cheeky, inviting smile.

"It looks as though the game has ended," he said, pretending to be casual. "Would you care to play another sort of game?"

Anthony seemed to waver on his spot before saying, "No." He winced for half a second before continuing with, "That is, no thank you. I was about to tour my estate to see if the rain caused any damage."

"Would you like company?" Barrett asked, his spirits lifting.

"Er, no," Anthony refused him, shifting restlessly as he did. He looked as though he wanted to say more, but instead he bolted down the hall saying, "I do beg your pardon."

Barrett huffed in frustration and glanced to Septimus as if to say, "You see the challenge I have?"

"Patience," Septimus said, thumping his shoulder again.

Septimus moved to Seymour's side—Barrett had been so caught up in Anthony that he'd forgotten the man was standing a few steps behind him—and the two of them headed off for their walk.

Barrett thought about joining the children in the kitchen but realized how pitiful that might look. He considered going off to find Red, but considered that spending the rest of the day with Anthony's brother would only lead to uncomfortable conversations. He headed back down the hall to the stairs then up to his room, but once he reached that solitude, nothing seemed to hold his interest. He didn't relish the idea of writing to his mother or sister, and the book he had been attempting to read was dry and failed to hold his attention.

What he needed was to get out of the house and expel his excess energy. As soon as he spotted the lake from his window, he made up his mind to take a swim. Once that was decided and his restlessness had a focus, he gathered up a towel and marched back down through

the house and out toward the lake.

Stripping off his clothes and diving into the cool, clear water was exactly what he'd needed. Whichever Wodehouse ancestor had thought to construct the lake was an absolute genius. It was perfectly situated to provide a lovely view from the house, but various areas around its shores held concealed nooks that were perfect for anyone who wished to escape from whatever company they might have been forced to endure. Some of those concealed spots were natural, such as the patch of grass at the far end surrounded by scrub trees, and some seemed to have been deliberately constructed.

Barrett swam until his muscles ached and some of his frustration over Anthony had abated before heading to the jetty where he'd left his clothing and his towel, then walking around the perimeter of the lake to one of those deliberately constructed spots. He didn't bother to dress, since there wasn't a soul in sight and the thought of dressing his wet body was abhorrent. The cleared area halfway along the lake's edge where a small terrace had been constructed seemed ideal for sunning oneself to dry off anyhow. The terrace was surrounded by a low, flowering hedge and had several urns of summer flowers around the edges. Someone maintained it, although at the moment it was abandoned.

Barrett spread his towel on the warm flagstones, then tossed his wad of clothes down to serve as a pillow. With a sigh over the frustration that he hadn't been able to swim away from, he sank to lie on his back, face tilted up to the sun, eyes closed. For a moment, he felt rather like a cat sunning itself and stretched appropriately. It felt so good to let the sun bake the water from his skin and to be free of the puzzle that was Anthony Wodehouse, if only for a moment.

Of course, the moment he so much as thought of Anthony's name, the man's face shone in his thoughts. His tight, worried face. Anthony was devilishly handsome, but the poor man probably had no idea. He'd certainly been beautiful when the two of them were inches away from each other, both behind the curtain and in the hall. There had been so much pent-up longing in the man's lovely, hazel eyes, so much to be explored. Barrett cursed himself for not kissing the man when he had the chance. He cursed himself for not caressing the man's backside, or better still, sliding a hand along the front of Anthony's breeches. Anthony could deny how he felt all he wanted, but Barrett had felt the stirrings of an erection against his leg in those tense moments.

That wasn't the only erection stirring. Barrett indulged in another, languid stretch in the sun, then shamelessly slid a hand down his stomach to fondle his balls. He sucked in a breath as he caressed and tugged a bit, then stroked his hand up his swiftly-hardening shaft.

How wonderful would it be if he finally did have his way with Anthony Wodehouse? He would treat the man like a prince, giving him everything he'd never dreamed of and more. He would peel away the stoic man's clothing bit by bit, then lavish every inch of his skin with kisses, bathing him with his tongue. He would meld his mouth with Anthony's and suck on his tongue until the rigid man moaned and loosened up.

Barrett let out a moan of his own at the thought, stroking himself harder. He wanted Anthony's cock in his mouth, wanted to challenge himself to take the man deep. He couldn't imagine that Anthony had ever had anyone swallow him before. He would love it, Barrett was certain. He would bury his fists in Barrett's hair and thrust into his mouth with abandon, and once he came and Barrett swallowed it all, they would switch places and Anthony would wrap those soft, expressive lips of his around Barrett's shaft.

Barrett made another sound of arousal as he imagined it. He let the fantasy carry on in his mind, imagining his hand was Anthony's mouth. He lavished his cock with attention, pulling back his foreskin and shivering with need as he swept his thumb around his engorged tip, spreading the moisture that had gathered there. It felt so good not just to treat himself, but to imagine Anthony helping things along.

Anthony. Barrett opened his eyes and found the man standing only a few yards away, watching him from the other side of the hedge. Anthony's eyes were round with surprise and desire, his face was flushed, and the bulge in his breeches was pronounced. Better still, the man's lips were slightly parted as he watched Barrett pleasure himself, echoing the fantasy that had driven him near to climax.

For the barest moment, Barrett paused, wondering if he should feel ashamed of himself for being caught by the object of his fantasy. But only for a moment. A new level of arousal filled him as he resumed pleasuring himself, slower now, spreading his legs wider and caressing his balls again before stroking his shaft. He wanted Anthony to see him. He wanted Anthony to see everything.

Walking had never failed to soothe Anthony's ruffled feelings and help him to concentrate on the problems he needed to solve.

Until now.

He stomped through the undergrowth separating the woods from the lake, pushing aside low-hanging branches and crushing twigs under his boots, but even those fits of exertion couldn't soothe his disquiet. His home was supposed to be his sanctuary, the one place where he felt safe and protected, like he could be himself. He knew every inch of the woods and meadows making up his property like the back of his hand. He thought he'd known every floorboard and curtain of his house as well, but all it took was one minute of concealment with Barrett, and he was left feeling like a stranger in a strange land.

He couldn't shake the man's scent from his nose, no matter how much damp earth and salt air he breathed in. He swore he could still feel Barrett's hand on his hip. His conversation with his brother had done absolutely nothing to relieve the anxiety that had seeped into his bones and wouldn't leave him. It had made every confused feeling within Anthony worse. Men enjoying themselves with other men? Perhaps such a thing was acceptable for Red or Mr. Seymour or Mr. Bolton, but it couldn't possibly be acceptable for him. He was a duke, for Christ's sake, and a member of the House of Lords. He had children to raise and an estate to manage, and—

A sinful moan floated through the trees where Anthony walked, along with the sound of birdsong and leftover raindrops falling from the branches above. The sound froze Anthony in his steps and sent a carnal shiver through him. He'd never heard a sound like that before, but he knew exactly what it was. Worse—or perhaps better—still, he knew exactly who had made the sound.

Heart in his throat and breeches tightening by the second, Anthony crept forward. He recognized where he was. Several of his ancestors had carved out niches along the lake's shore as reading or picnic spots. His mother had constructed the small terrace he was approaching when Anthony was just a baby so that she might take tea with her friends away from the noise of the house. The furnishings had long since been removed, but Anthony had always found the spot rather

pretty and had requested that Shelton maintain the hedges and flowers. He'd always planned to make use of the terrace again someday, but it seemed that someone had beat him to it.

He nearly burst out of his skin as he stepped clear of the trees and peered over the hedge to find Barrett spread out on a towel in the sun, like some sort of male wood nymph. He was naked and still dotted with glistening drops of water from a swim he must have taken earlier. The sunlight sparkled off of his magnificent physique. He had one arm raised above his head and bent, and his other arm...

Anthony swallowed as his mouth went dry. Barrett was caressing himself intimately. His face was pinched with pleasure as he stroked his hard, thick cock. Moisture glistened on the flared tip, and for a moment Anthony thought it would drip to Barrett's belly before Barrett stroked his thumb over it, humming with pleasure as he did.

Heat and need throbbed through Anthony at the sight. He couldn't look away. Barrett was gorgeous in every way. His chest was broad and covered lightly with hair that narrowed to a line across his flat belly. His legs were strong and lithe. But it was his magnificent cock and drawn-up balls that Anthony couldn't look away from. Anthony had avoided looking at another man's genitals for his entire life, but now he feasted on the sight. It wasn't just Barrett's impressive length that captivated him, it was the sinful pleasure he knew Barrett was giving himself, the way his hand traveled up and down the shaft, his thumb periodically stroking the tip, that had Anthony's blood pulsing so hard in his veins that he went lightheaded.

His own cock responded vigorously, pressing hard against the falls of his breeches. Mad thoughts rushed at him—that he wanted to be the one stroking Barrett, that he should open his falls and stroke himself as well, that he wanted Barrett's hands on him. He roared at himself to push those thoughts aside, argued that they weren't appropriate. He ignored that voice and continued to stare, arousal building within him to towering heights.

And then Barrett opened his eyes. Anthony froze, certain lightning would strike him to ash or that Barrett would rail at him and call him every foul name there was. He couldn't move, couldn't tear his eyes away from Barrett's. Disaster would surely strike at any moment.

It didn't. Instead, with fire in his eyes that threatened to consume Anthony alive, Barrett continued pleasuring himself, his eyes locked on Anthony. He opened his legs wider, and Anthony's head swam at the sight in front of him. Barrett fondled his balls, making Anthony's own balls throb for that sort of touch, then drew his hand up his rock-hard staff. Prickles broke out down Anthony's back and excitement like he'd never felt before raced through him. He expected Barrett to stop at any moment, expected himself to wake up from the feverish

dream he must have been caught up in.

Barrett didn't stop. He stroked himself harder and faster, his breath growing shallow. The sounds he made were obscene. They went straight to Anthony's own cock. All the while, Barrett never took his eyes off Anthony's. He knew Anthony was watching, knew it, and if Anthony's instinct was right, loved it. His movements turned frantic and the sounds he made desperate, until with a gasp and a groan, thick, pearly jets erupted from his tip and spilled across his belly.

Anthony barely realized he'd made a sound of pleasure akin to Barrett's until the sound was almost gone. His body was alight, and he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt he was moments away from coming himself. But with the pleasure burning him from the inside came a wave of fear. He should not have witnessed what he'd just seen, and he most certainly should not have been so deeply aroused by it.

He turned and stumbled away, his every movement made painful because of his erection. Nothing in his life had ever made him feel the overwhelming need that pulsed through him now, not even conceiving his children with Charlotte. Those nights hadn't come close to how he felt at that moment, and now he knew why. He knew why as surely as he knew the terrain of his own estate. Even without the awkward conversation he'd had earlier with Redmond, he would have known. There was no ignoring the truth now.

He stumbled a few more paces forward until he reached a particularly large oak. He ducked behind it, leaning his back against the rough bark, and fumbled with the falls of his breeches. As wicked as it made him, he couldn't keep walking with a cockstand the size of the tree he was leaning against. He needed relief, and he needed it immediately.

Pushing his breeches down his hips and bunching his shirt up, he took his already stiff cock in hand and stroked. It felt so good to feel skin against skin and to indulge in the pleasure of intimate touch, even if he was just touching himself. He leaned his head back against the tree, eyes closed, and fisted himself hard, hoping to climax as quickly as possible so he could move on.

His hand stopped a fraction of a moment later when he heard the crunch of footfalls in the underbrush right beside him. Holding his breath, he opened his eyes just as Barrett stepped around the tree. Barrett was still naked, and his eyes still burned with desire. He didn't say a word, all he did was move in close to Anthony, brush his hand aside, and close his own hand around Anthony's aching cock.

Anthony let out a shaky breath and braced himself against the tree as Barrett picked up where he'd left off. Barrett's touch was intoxicating. He stroked deliberately, as if to give Anthony as much

pleasure as possible instead of just to bring him off. It was as if someone had opened the gates of heaven and an angel had come down to whisper secrets into Anthony's ear. Barrett's hand on him was so good that he found himself fighting not to come so that the moment could last as long as possible.

When Barrett leaned in to close his mouth over Anthony's, Anthony knew he was gone. He moaned into Barrett's kiss, eyes closed, reveling in the moment. As long as he kept his eyes closed, he could pretend it was all some glorious dream without consequences. Barrett shifted to cover Anthony's body with his own, his hand still stroking as he devoured Anthony's mouth with power and perfection. Between the kiss and the touch, Anthony's senses reeled and soared. It was all too much, too beautiful. He was a duke, he wasn't supposed to be putty in another man's hands, but every moment was glorious. Barrett groaned along with him as he kissed Anthony and sucked on his tongue. Anthony had never imagined such a thing was possible.

It was the tongue sucking that did Anthony in. He was barely ready when his groin tightened and lightning coursed through him as he came. He moaned into Barrett's mouth as he spilled himself more than he thought possible into Barrett's hand. Barrett seemed intent on wringing every last drop from him, and by the time Anthony's body stopped throbbing and he sagged heavily against the tree, he couldn't remember his own name. All he knew was pleasure and Barrett.

For the space of three seconds.

As soon as sense crashed back in on him, Anthony gasped and jerked straight. His movements caused him to knock into Barrett, inadvertently pushing him away.

"I'm sorry," he panted, scrambling to tuck himself back into his breeches and to make himself look even slightly presentable. "God, I'm so terribly sorry."

Shame washed over him like a storm, making him hot and clumsy. He couldn't look Barrett in the eyes as he stumbled away from the tree. He caught his foot on a branch and nearly fell, but righted himself quickly enough to break into a run as he fled the scene of his misbehavior. What had he been thinking, stopping to watch Barrett in an impossibly intimate moment? He'd doubled his sin by pleasuring himself as well, then trebled it by allowing Barrett to bring him off instead of hiding from the man. In all his life, Anthony had never done anything half as wicked, never ignored propriety and sense so badly.

He raced all the way back to the house, all the way to his room, before stopping. As soon as he was safe within his bedchamber, he stripped out of the clothes he'd been wearing and dashed to the washstand to clear away the remaining evidence of his transgression. But sliding a damp sponge over his body only reminded him of the

way Barrett's hand had felt. Being naked brought to mind the sight of Barrett's sun-dappled body and the way he'd pleased himself. Anthony began to grow hard all over again, which was one frustration too much. He threw his sponge aside and marched to his wardrobe to dress in the most practical clothes he owned.

He couldn't bring himself to face Barrett again, though, or anyone else. Once dressed, he sagged into the chair by his window and buried his head in his hands. He couldn't possibly be feeling the way he felt. It was unthinkable for him to suddenly be struck by desire so late in his life. And desire for a man at that. Barrett was lovely and amiable and handsome. He was a delight to look at and a joy to talk to. Anthony's own children loved him like an uncle—a point which still made him burn with irrational jealousy if he thought about it too long. But as he did think about it, the wild thought that his children would approve of any sort of attachment that developed between him and Barrett, that they would likely rejoice if Barrett stayed longer than the allotted summer, curled around him.

More than a summer? No. Anthony rejected the notion. One moment of indiscretion with a man he rather liked was not a reason for his thoughts to careen off in impossible directions. He was a duke. He had land that needed attention, tenants that needed guidance. He had children who looked to him as a model of behavior. He was an influential member of Parliament. The weight of so many people's hopes and livelihoods rested on his shoulders. He could not throw all that away because it felt pleasurable for a man to bring him off. Or to kiss him. Or to laugh when he spoke and smile at him as though he, as a man of flesh and bone and desires, were important and valuable and not just his title and the skill with which he carried out his duties.

In the middle of his thoughts, his bedroom door opened and Winters stepped in. At the sight of Anthony slumped in his chair, Winters started and let out a quick, "Oh! Your Grace. I was not aware you'd returned to the house."

"I only just returned," Anthony lied a bit with as polite a smile as he could manage. He sat straighter, suddenly worried that he'd missed a spot while cleaning himself up or that his valet could somehow smell what he'd done, or worse, smell Barrett's unique scent on him.

"I do not wish to disturb you, Your Grace," Winters said, taking a half step back, head lowered slightly. "I only came to choose a suitable suit for you for supper tonight. I could come back later, if you'd like."

"No," Anthony said, rising. "I am interfering with your duties, and that is unforgivable."

His face pinched as soon as the words had crossed his lips. Barrett was an interference with his duties, but a deep part of him didn't want

that to be unforgivable. He didn't want anything that had happened between the two of them to be unforgivable. But damn him if he wasn't convinced he'd done a great wrong.

A moment later, he realized he was simply standing there with a pained look on his face as Winters eyed him warily while picking through his wardrobe.

"Your Grace," Winters said with concern, "are you, perhaps, in need of a headache powder? You look a bit piqued."

"No, Winters, I am well," Anthony insisted. He took a few steps toward the door, but was suddenly overcome with an absolute aversion to leaving his room and facing company. Specifically, he didn't know how he could face Barrett. How would he ever be able to look the man in the eyes again when he'd spilled his seed across Barrett's hand and had his tongue in Barrett's mouth?

Winters cleared his throat, catching Anthony's attention once more. "Your Grace, I should have mentioned this earlier, but I happened to notice a gentleman arrive wishing to speak with you as I started upstairs just now. Worthington was interviewing him to see what he wanted, but it has just occurred to me that Worthington does not know you are here. He may be seeking for you elsewhere."

Unexpected relief washed through Anthony. At last, something else to think about.

"I shall investigate at once," he said, nodded to Winters, then marched out of the room.

The gentleman in question was waiting alone just inside the doorway when Anthony made it to the bottom of the stairs. He was a relatively young man in a plain suit with brown hair and a somewhat rat-like face. As soon as he spotted Anthony, he broke into an oily smile and strode up to greet Anthony a little too boldly.

"Your Grace," he began. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Martin Goddard, representative from Hamilton, Bradley, and Associates."

Anthony gave the outspoken man his sternest frown—both because he had overstepped at least a dozen bounds in approaching him the way he had and because it was a blessed relief to don the mantle of duke in order to escape the roiling and confused emotions of a man within him.

He ignored Goddard's offered hand by clasping his own hands behind his back and saying, "Mr. Goddard. To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?" His tone conveyed that the visit was anything but a pleasure.

"Your Grace, I have taken the liberty of approaching you at home today on behalf of Haight Industries about the purchase of several acres of your estate." Goddard bowed a few times as he spoke and

worried the brim of the hat he carried in his hands. Those were the only signs that the brash young man realized he'd broken protocol by approaching Anthony at home.

"Yes, my man of business has informed me that an industrialist has his eyes on my hereditary lands because he thinks they might be suited for some sort of industrial monstrosity."

Goddard laughed nervously, his face going puce. "That is correct, Your Grace. Though if you would give me leave, I can enumerate all the reasons why selling a small portion of your land to Haight would not only enrich your own coffers, but would provide employment and stability for a great many people in this part of Yorkshire."

To his surprise, the idea of providing for the residents of the area nearby struck a chord in Anthony. It was the only reason he didn't call for Worthington to have the man thrown out right then and there. As loath as he was to break up his estate in any way, talk in London that season had been all about the ways that new-style factories had brought employment and prosperity to many. Anthony didn't feel as though he knew enough about it to make a snap decision, but a potential means for him to learn what a factory could mean appeared to be standing before him.

"I would be interested in speaking with you, Mr. Goddard," he began, "but not at this precise moment. Please arrange a meeting with my man of business—"

Those words were as far as he got. A rumble of footsteps and conversation sounded from the far end of the hall, and when he turned to look, he spotted Barrett striding toward him, Seymour and Bolton walking with him. As soon as Barrett noticed him, their eyes locked, and a swooping feeling filled Anthony's gut. He'd never been so happy to see someone in his life, nor so terrified.

Barrett walked carefully back to the terrace, where he'd left his clothes, head spinning and heart thundering against his ribs, even though Anthony had run off already. He was, frankly, stunned by the boldness of what he'd done. Perhaps it was a burst of post-orgasmic confidence that had caused him to get up and follow Anthony into the woods, or perhaps it was the absolute certainty, after everything Barrett had seen in the man's eyes as he watched Barrett take his pleasure, that Anthony wanted him as much as he was wanted, he just needed a little help.

As he dressed, Barrett grinned from ear to ear and hummed in contentment as he remembered how little help Anthony had needed in the end. The man was a box of treasure just waiting to be opened, and Barrett had lifted the lid to peek inside. Part of him had expected Anthony to shove him away and to make some furious excuse about why Barrett had no right to look at him, let alone touch him. Not only did Anthony revel in Barrett's intimate touch, the stolid duke had let himself be kissed. And it had been magnificent. The potential that underlay the way their mouths had melded and their tongues had danced left Barrett hungry for more, for everything.

He finished cleaning up and dressing as best he could, then headed back to the house. Supper wasn't all that far away, and in spite of his swim, Barrett felt as though he needed a bit of a bath before dressing and joining everyone else. He didn't ever want to wash the scent of Anthony's musk away, though. He didn't think he would ever forget the man's taste either, even if they never kissed again, which Barrett certainly hoped wouldn't be the case. There were a thousand ways he wanted to kiss Anthony, from light and teasing to overwhelming and passionate. He was willing to wager that Anthony needed to be taught to kiss properly, along with everything else the man needed to learn. Those lessons would be bliss.

Barrett's amorous train of thought distracted him as he walked through the woods, which caused him to take a few wrong turns and find himself a bit lost. Even that was a source of amusement to him, and by the time he found the path that would take him up to the house, striding along with a spring in his step and his towel thrown

jauntily over his shoulder, the sun was starting to dip toward the horizon.

"You look entirely too pleased with yourself," Septimus called to him as he and Adam drew near to Barrett where two branches of the path met up closer to the house.

Barrett didn't try to hide the feeling. He beamed at the way Septimus and Adam held hands while they walked. Instead of feeling a vague pang of longing, his heart was filled with the confidence that he, too, might have a sweetheart of sorts before too long. Not that he was looking for the sort of sweetness that existed between Septimus and Adam—or even the casual attachment that Red had with Lucas Salterford. It was simply nice to know that someone might care for him as a lover.

"It has been an edifying afternoon," Barrett said, falling into step with his friends as they continued the rest of the way to the house.

Septimus laughed. "I take it you were able to corner our host to have a frank discussion with him?"

Barrett pictured the way Anthony had been pressed up against the oak, moaning into his mouth as Barrett kissed him and stroked his rather magnificent cock to climax. "You could say that," he answered with a grin.

Neither Septimus nor Adam were fooled.

"I told you a bit of patience was all that was needed in the situation," Septimus said.

"What is meant to be will be," Adam agreed with a sage nod.

Barrett shrugged, still enjoying the cloud of bliss he felt as though he walked in. "I do not know if anything all that fanciful is meant to be, but whatever the case, what will most certainly come to pass will be fun."

Septimus and Adam shook their heads and exchanged looks as though they knew something Barrett didn't know. They were near to one of the house's garden entrances and there were footmen and gardeners within earshot, so Barrett couldn't tell them off and insist he was looking for nothing beyond a bit of sensual enjoyment for the summer. Though if it turned out that Anthony could be more than a diversion, Barrett would not fight it. It was not as though he had a great deal of other pressing matters to attend to.

"Did the two of you enjoy your seaside walk?" Barrett asked instead, making small conversation as they headed down the hall toward the front stairs.

"We did," Adam said with a smile. "We stopped by the Henshaw house to see how the refurbishment process is coming along. The whole enterprise is still new, and the men Mr. Carver has hired say quite a few things will need to be altered before the house is suitable

to use as a school, however—”

Adam stopped cold, his mouth hanging open as they reached the front hall. Barrett was overcome with a moment of emotion, but not the sort Adam must have been feeling at the sight of Mr. Goddard, his old rival. Barrett’s gaze had flown straight to Anthony’s. Warmth and affection and lust and a dozen other emotions battered him like a storm at sea. If he’d had any misconception that seeing Anthony in a different setting, fully clothed, would counteract the heady memory of the two of them in the woods, he was disabused of that notion. If anything, his desire for the man had doubled.

“What are you doing here?” Adam broke Barrett’s momentary feeling of arousal by marching aggressively forward with a scowl.

Goddard tipped his nose up as though Adam were a bad smell. “I am here on business, to speak to the Duke of Malton,” he said, not bothering to address Adam at all.

“I am certain His Grace is not interested in anything you have to say.” Adam paused in front of Goddard, crossing his arms and looking as though he were ready to start a new war.

Barrett exchanged a glance with Septimus, who appeared wary about the interaction. He shot Barrett a sideways look before striding forward to take up a place by Adam’s side.

“His Grace has just invited me to make an appointment to discuss the sale of a portion of his land to a client of mine,” Goddard told Adam with a sniff, as though something so banal was a sign of superiority.

Barrett hurried forward to join the conversation, studying Anthony with something that was not carnal interest, for a change. “Would you truly consider selling a portion of your property?” he asked.

Barrett immediately thought he’d overstepped his bounds until Anthony glanced at him with a look that hinted he might like Barrett’s opinion. Almost as if he was someone whose opinion he valued.

“I have yet to hear the details of the proposal,” he admitted in his regal tones, his posture every bit as dignified as a duke’s should be. Something about the imperiousness that had come over Anthony made Barrett want to tear the man’s clothes off and ravish him to bits.

“There is no need to hear anything this man has to say,” Adam growled, staring daggers at Goddard. “He is dishonest in his dealings and peevish in his disposition, and you would do best, Your Grace, to dismiss him at once rather than listen to a word that spews from his lips.”

Anthony’s brow shot up. He glanced to Barrett as if to ask whether he was missing something.

Barrett cleared his throat and inched closer to Anthony. So close that he could smell the scent of fresh soap and clean linen. It went

straight to his groin, but he still managed to say, "Mr. Seymour and Mr. Goddard have a rivalry that dates back quite some time."

"I see," Anthony nodded, as though a few words from Barrett were all he needed. He turned back to Goddard. "As I said before, Mr. Goddard, please speak with my man of business, who will arrange a formal meeting between us, if there is time in my schedule. In the meantime," he went on as Goddard opened his mouth to reply, "I ask that you leave my house at once, since I did not invite you."

Goddard's mouth flapped for a moment before he closed it and bowed. "Yes, Your Grace. Until we are able to speak again." He executed a second bow, turned to glare at Adam, then marched out of the house as though he had triumphed instead of falling a bit flat.

As soon as Worthington had shown him out, the prickling tension that Barrett expected from his first meeting with Anthony after their encounter filled the hallway. It was so acute that Barrett could tell Septimus and Adam sensed it. The two of them exchanged looks as though they were trying not to grin.

"I suppose we should dress for supper," Septimus said, brushing Adam's arm, then pointing him in the direction of the stairs.

"I suppose we should," Adam echoed, his mouth pulling into a grin as he and Septimus rushed to leave Barrett and Anthony alone.

Barrett watched them go, uncertain whether he was grateful for their speedy exit or whether he wanted to roll his eyes at them for being so obvious in their reasons for leaving. Either way, they left Barrett and Anthony alone with their bristling awkwardness.

Anthony watched Septimus and Adam retreating up the stairs for far longer than was ordinary. He was then forced to drag his eyes slowly to meet Barrett's. "I—" he started, but got no further than that.

Barrett's heart swelled with compassion for the man. He was so far out of his depth that the least Barrett could do was rescue him. "Would you care to go for a walk, Your Grace?" he asked with a smile. "That way I can tell you more about the rivalry between Mr. Seymour and Mr. Goddard." He peeked sideways to where one of the upstairs maids was trying to cross the hall and head up the stairs as unobtrusively as possible.

"Yes, I'd like that," Anthony said, letting his shoulders drop.

"Come on, then," Barrett said with a cheeky wink, heading for the front door.

Worthington was still manning the door and held it open so that the two of them could head out into the late afternoon, post-storm sunlight. There was still a bit of dampness in the grass, and a slight haze misted the lawn on either side of the path Barrett and Anthony walked. Barrett spotted Mr. Goddard riding away farther down the main drive, but the man was no longer a factor in the evening.

“Goddard and Seymour attended school together,” Barrett explained, nodding to Goddard’s retreating form as they walked away from the house and any prying ears. “Apparently, Seymour bested the man at everything, and Goddard resented it. Before you returned home, Goddard was intent on purchasing the Henshaw house for clients who wished to convert it into a convalescent home for fortune-hunters planning to holiday near the home of a duke.”

“Oh,” Anthony said with a frown. “I suppose I should thank Mr. Carver for letting the house to Seymour instead.”

“You should,” Barrett said with a laugh. “The man might have saved you from quite a bit of trouble and irritation.”

They’d ventured far enough along the path and were approaching the rose garden, and Anthony stopped, turning to Barrett with a pinched expression. “Goddard isn’t why you wished to speak to me alone,” he said. With some difficulty, he raised his eyes to meet Barrett’s gaze.

The heady combination of dignity and vulnerability in Anthony’s eyes had Barrett’s heart pounding against his ribs. “It’s not,” he admitted, stepping close enough to Anthony to reach out and brush his hand. “How are you feeling?”

Anthony turned a fetching shade of pink. “Confused,” he admitted, glancing off across the vast amount of land he owned. “A bit guilty.” He dragged his gaze back to meet Barrett’s. “A bit in awe.”

Barrett’s thundering heart leapt a bit at that descriptor. “I was caught up in the moment,” he said, neither apologizing nor congratulating himself for his actions.

“As was I,” Anthony admitted. For the space of a heartbeat, he bit his lip. Barrett was certain Anthony wasn’t aware of the gesture, but it had his senses soaring all the same. Anthony’s expression tightened and his brow furrowed as though he were struggling to speak, but when he did, he whispered, “That is the most alive I’ve felt in my entire life.”

Barrett couldn’t help himself. He stepped into Anthony, clasping the man’s hot face in his hands and slanting his mouth over Anthony’s. His kiss was intended to reassure, but it turned into more than that. The need that pulsed through Barrett was like nothing he’d ever felt before. He caressed Anthony’s lips with his own, brushed his tongue along the seam of Anthony’s mouth, and eventually thrust his tongue against Anthony’s once Anthony let him in. Anthony leaned into him, grabbing hold of Barrett’s already rumpled jacket as though he needed it to stay upright.

A moment later, Anthony groaned against Barrett’s mouth and pulled back with a gasp. “Wait,” he panted, his eyes half-lidded as he looked at Barrett. “More needs to be said.”

“You can say anything to me, love,” Barrett panted, though if he were honest, words were not what he wanted.

“I am not certain that I can,” Anthony said, distress in his expression. “I am on unfamiliar ground. I have never felt this way before. I cannot help but think this spark within me contradicts every responsibility I have.”

Barrett stroked the contour of Anthony’s face, enjoying the rough texture of his late-afternoon stubble. “Responsibility has nothing to do with this.”

Anthony arched an eyebrow at him. “I beg to differ. Responsibility dictates everything about my life. These new feelings, this... excitement...” He blew out a breath and glanced away again, though he did not try to shake Barrett’s hand off. When he met Barrett’s eyes again, he said, “I do not know how this fits with my life as I know it.”

“Do you need to know?” Barrett asked. “Or might you just explore these new feelings and see where they lead?”

Anthony bit his lip again for a brief moment. The vulnerability of the gesture was devastatingly beautiful coming from a man who was so deeply certain of himself most of the time.

Barrett answered his own question. “Nothing must be done right this moment,” he said, taking a half step back and brushing his hand down Anthony’s arm to take his hand. “But allow me to come to your room tonight, after supper.”

Anthony’s eyes popped wide. “My bedchamber?” When Barrett nodded, Anthony went on in an even higher pitch with, “Tonight?”

“Would that be acceptable?” Barrett asked. “We could explore the matter further.” He couldn’t keep the lascivious sparkle out of his eyes as he spoke.

Anthony might have been inexperienced in such things, but the man was not a dolt. Barrett could see that he clearly knew what was being asked. Which was why he was surprised when Anthony answered, “Yes. Yes, I think I’d like that.”

The sharp color that came to Anthony’s face and the gleam in his eyes was so endearing that Barrett couldn’t help but kiss the man again. He didn’t linger, as much as he wanted to. It was obvious to him that Anthony was still struggling with himself. He was loath to push too hard.

“Until tonight then,” he said, stepping back and allowing Anthony a bit of room to breathe. “And now, I need to go wash up a bit and change for supper. I will see you shortly. There is no need to make reference to any of this in conversation with our friends,” he added, “but you do realize they are aware of the situation.”

Anthony winced slightly but nodded.

“Do not mind them,” Barrett added as he turned to go. “For that

lot, teasing is a means of caring.”

Barrett left Anthony to ponder that and to finish his walk as he himself hurried back to the house. His original plan to bathe quickly and carelessly had transformed into plans for a thorough washing in preparation for the night ahead of him. He searched for the footman who'd been assigned to care for his and Septimus's needs as he burst into the house, but instead he found Worthington, and Worthington spoke first.

“My lord, a letter has just arrived for you,” the capable butler said. “As it is in your sister's hand, I thought you might want to be in possession of it right away.”

Barrett's brow rose and he burst into a smile at Worthington's assessment. The man was a wizard when it came to recognizing handwriting and knowing when correspondence was important. “Thank you, Worthington,” he said, taking the letter and heading on up the stairs.

He tore into the letter as he hurried along to his room, trusting there would be enough water in his washbasin already for a thorough bath. The letter was indeed from Sophia, though it wasn't the sort of cheery frippery Barrett was hoping for.

After a quick greeting, his sister wrote, *“I am positively livid with you, Barry. I have just learned that the HMS Majesty was decommissioned in plenty of time for you to travel from Portsmouth to London to assist me in the final weeks of the season. I would very much have liked your company as well, as Aunt Elizabeth is a terrible bore and could only secure me a voucher for Almack's once. The invitations I received during my first season were paltry at best, and I fear my second season will be an even greater disappointment unless something is done.”*

Barrett frowned at the letter as he pushed open the door of his guestroom and strode inside. He didn't know what Sophia expected him to do about the situation. He knew practically no one in London and had no wish to indulge in the life there.

Sophia, as it happened, did know what she wanted. *“Therefore,”* her letter continued after another paragraph of complaints, *“I have decided to take matters into my own hand. An opportunity has presented itself that I find quite alluring, and I will not pass it up. All I will say about the matter is that you had your chance and you have been warned.”*

From there, she filled up another page with gossip about distant family members and acquaintances in London that Barrett wasn't particularly interested in. The words he'd already read caused him enough concern for five letters. What could Sophia possibly mean about taking matters into her own hands? And in what way had he been warned?

Barrett sighed and tossed the letter aside before stripping out of his

soiled clothes and heading to his washstand. He had better things to think about than the mischief his younger sister was up to. In fact, his sister was the very last thing he wanted to think about when it was entirely likely he would end up in Anthony's bed that night. But try as he might to put Sophia out of his mind, she stayed lodged there like a burr as he washed with excessive thoroughness and dressed for supper. What could the little chit be up to, and would it interfere with his blissful dereliction of duty?

Anthony let out a long, shaky breath as Barrett walked away. He couldn't believe what he'd just done. He'd accepted a man's invitation to come to his room that night for the expressed purpose of making love. A man. Him. Making love.

He turned away from Barrett's retreating form, hands shaking, and strode into the rose garden as fast as he could, his breath coming in short, panicked pants. This sort of behavior was not like him at all. Perhaps it was ordinary for Redmond, but it was beyond extraordinary for him. He was not the sort of man to indulge in carnal pleasures. He never had been. Not even when Charlotte was still alive. And yes, there was a strong possibility he had never been interested before because he had never allowed himself to consider in which direction his pleasures lay, but that didn't explain the deep, pulsing excitement that made him feel dizzy with anticipation now. It didn't explain the laughter that wanted to bubble up within him or the smile he couldn't wipe off of his face.

He was a bloody duke, for Christ's sake, and he was thirty-four years old. He should not feel so breathless and giddy and a little bit afraid. He was not some virgin bride on her wedding night, waiting in anticipation of her husband's arrival.

And yet, in a way, he was. What he was about to do, he'd never done before. He barely knew what to expect. He knew the functions of his own body, and after that afternoon, he knew that Barrett could easily bring him to climax. He knew how pleasurable that felt now. And he'd had congress with Charlotte enough times to conceive two children. But Charlotte had been a woman and Barrett was most definitely a man. Logic and knowledge of the male anatomy were enough to suggest the mechanics of things between two men, but how in God's name was any of that supposed to proceed? How were they supposed to know who would take which role or how that was to be carried out? Would Barrett laugh at him for being so woefully ignorant of what he was supposed to do? Worse still, as his body reacted to his thoughts alone, as though it were confident he had finally discovered what it wanted, Anthony was suddenly seized by the fear that he would overexcite himself and fire his cannons before

his ship had come about, so to speak. He wasn't an excitable lad who could recover in five minutes and try again, after all.

"What was I thinking?" he gasped to himself as he rounded the far end of the house and started back to the front door. Supper would be called soon, and he needed to be there. Francis and Eliza would miss him if he wasn't. Even though it was highly irregular, he enjoyed having his children at supper with the rest of his guests, and the guests enjoyed their company as well.

Barrett enjoyed the children's company. That thought warmed Anthony's heart and calmed him a bit as he circled around the house. Francis and Eliza would likely be pleased to have Barrett extend his stay at Wodehouse Abbey. They would approve of any friendship between him and Barrett. Even if they were far too young to know the intricacies of the whole thing. Still, in time, perhaps they would come to see Barrett as a member of the household, like Red or their other aunts and uncle.

"What has possessed me?" Anthony asked himself, pausing near the front door to shove a hand through his hair. He shook his head at himself before entering the house. He wasn't about to engage himself to a suitable life partner, he was about to invite a gentleman into his room to engage in every manner of lascivious and sordid behavior.

Except that it didn't feel sordid. It felt as though he were about to open the windows and take a deep breath of fresh air after years spent in stuffy isolation.

He kept that thought at the forefront of his mind as everyone sat down to supper. The minutes seemed to tick by with agonizing slowness. He attempted to converse with Francis and Eliza, seated on either side of him, or with Red and the rest of the guests. A lively conversation about the merits of strawberry-rhubarb tarts sprang up over the fish course that seemed to engage the entire company, children included. Septimus treated them all to an adventurous tale of his earlier days in the navy, when his captain decided he was in desperate need of rhubarb as they sailed the Caribbean. The children were captivated. The former naval officers were amused.

Anthony barely heard a word they said. He was too busy watching Barrett's lips as they caressed his spoon while eating the soup course. He couldn't think as he followed the movements of Barrett's hands as they cut his roast, imagining how they would feel against his body once more. Most alarming of all, he couldn't help but notice the slight, distracted frown Barrett wore or the way he stared a little too intently at his plate, or even the way he barely participated in the conversation with the others. Barrett's mind was clearly elsewhere, and Anthony was not entirely certain it was in a good place.

Had Barrett changed his mind? Had he decided Anthony wasn't

worth the trouble of educating in the ways of the flesh after all? Perhaps he regretted everything that had happened since the moment behind the curtains that morning and was attempting to ignore it and put it all behind him now. For Anthony, it felt as though his entire world had been blasted to pieces and stood on the verge of being reformed. There was a chance that Barrett, who must have been used to such things after his time in the navy, was no longer interested.

Anthony excused himself from the after-supper round of brandy and billiards that had become ordinary since his return home.

"I find myself more than usually tired this evening," he told the other men, careful not to look at Barrett. "If you will excuse me, I think I shall retire early tonight."

"Whatever you feel is best," Red said, thumping him on the back and giving him a salacious wink.

Anthony's face heated, and he felt as though he might melt into a puddle of embarrassment. His brother had a preternatural sense of what was afoot, and Anthony had no doubt that all of his guests would know as soon as he started upstairs, if they didn't know already, as Barrett had said they did. In a way, it galled him. He'd spent his entire life cultivating dignity and gravity as a duke. Now, he felt like a lad fresh out of the schoolroom, green and uncertain. It was intolerable.

His own feelings weren't the only intolerable thing, however.

"Your Grace, you have returned early," Winters said, lifting his head from where he'd been sitting in the chair by one of Anthony's bedroom windows, repairing the seam of a pair of Anthony's breeches. He leapt up, face coloring as though he'd done something wrong. "I beg your pardon, Your Grace. Only, the light from this window is far superior to that in the servants' hall for repair work of this nature."

"It is quite all right, Winters," Anthony said, assuming a serious bearing that he didn't feel. "I have decided to retire early tonight, as it has been a long day."

"Understandable, Your Grace." Winters nodded, set aside his mending, and rushed to help Anthony remove his jacket. "I shall retrieve your nightshirt from the wardrobe and take your boots to be polished at once, Your Grace."

"There is no need," Anthony said, glancing to the door. How long would Barrett wait to come to his room? He'd watched Anthony leave and knew all the reasons why he was retiring early.

"Would you care for warm milk to help you sleep, Your Grace?" Winters asked as he took Anthony's jacket to brush it, then came back to help him off with his boots. "Something stronger, perhaps?"

"No thank you, Winters," Anthony said, cursing Winters's efficiency. "I simply wish to go to bed...er, to go to sleep."

“Yes, Your Grace.” Winters pulled off his boots as Anthony sat in the chair with the mending. “I will turn down the bed for you, in just a moment.”

“That really isn’t necessary tonight,” Anthony said, losing patience like a sieve lost water. He stared at the door, dreading the embarrassment of Barrett showing up while Winters was still there. Dear God, Barrett wouldn’t show up at his door naked, would he? Or wearing nothing but a banyan? While he rather relished that idea, if Winters was still there, it would be disaster.

“Do you wish to bathe before bed, Your Grace?” Winters asked as he fussed with Anthony’s neckcloth. “I could call for a maid to bring more water up.”

“No, Winters,” Anthony snapped, wincing at himself for losing patience. He batted the man’s hands away and finished undressing himself. “I appreciate your attentions, Winters, but truly, I am exhausted and would like to be left alone to sleep.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Winters said with a formal bow, his expression showing no offense, thankfully. “I will continue my mending downstairs, and I shall return in the morning to help you dress.”

“Thank you, Winters.”

Anthony was so flustered by the man that he walked him to the door, peeking his head into the hall to see if Barrett was on his way. He still felt there was an even chance that Barrett had given up on the idea of carnal relations altogether and that he wouldn’t come, but he hoped he was wrong.

“Good night, Your Grace,” Winters said with one final bow, then headed off down the hall.

As soon as Anthony closed the door behind him, he raced through removing the rest of his clothes and tossed them haphazardly aside. His hands shook as he undid the buttons of his waistcoat and breeches, and in his haste to pull his shirt off, something ripped. He didn’t have time to care, though. If Barrett was, indeed, coming, he would be there any moment. Anthony lunged toward his washstand, poured water from the pitcher into the bowl, and proceeded to bathe himself as thoroughly as he could in as short a time as possible.

His mind raced. Was there a particular way one bathed themselves when expecting a male caller for sexual intimacies? He was certain there were a thousand things he didn’t know, but he paid special attention to washing the parts of himself he knew Barrett would be interested in, which caused him to stretch in a few rather interesting ways. Once he was clean and dried, he glanced around his room, uncertain what to do next. Should he remain in a state of undress or climb between the covers of his bed and greet Barrett with a sultry, “Enter,” when the man inevitably knocked on his door—or didn’t

knock on his door? Anthony simply didn't know.

In the end, he threw on an old banyan from his wardrobe, then proceeded to pace around his room, feeling as though he would wear the carpet bare. All the while, his mind circled through the same question over and over—what if Barrett didn't come?

That fear was allayed what felt like an hour later—but could have been five minutes, for all Anthony knew—when there was a soft knock at the door. Anthony let out a tiny, undignified whine of anxious excitement and flew to answer the door.

Blessedly, Barrett was standing on the other side. He wore only his breeches and shirt, but had a banyan thrown over his shoulder. In his hand he held a small jar of some sort, but Anthony hardly noticed. The mischief and anticipation in Barrett's eyes were all he needed to see.

"I brought a little something we will need that I'm certain you do not have on hand," Barrett said, holding up the jar as he stepped through the doorway, shutting the door behind him. "It's a lubricant," he explained, "for—"

Anthony didn't let him finish. He was too wound up and overwrought with anticipation and relief. He flew at Barrett, wrapping his arms around the man and slamming his mouth against Barrett's in a wild kiss, not really in possession of any idea what he was doing. Barrett exclaimed in surprise, but the sound was muffled by their mouths pressed together. It took Barrett only a moment before he recovered enough to clasp his arms around Anthony and back him toward the bed, laughing as he did.

"And here I was worried I might have to coax you into something as mild as a kiss," Barrett said, breathing heavily. He dove in for another kiss as the back of Anthony's legs hit the side of his bed. He didn't stop there, though. Barrett pushed him until he fell to his back, sprawling across the bed, then crawled over him.

"I have no idea at all what I am doing," Anthony gasped between Barrett's frantic kisses. "I am half out of my mind with confusion and worry at this moment. I have far too many questions and not a single answer." He was stopped from going on as Barrett kissed him long and hard. As intoxicating as that kiss was, Anthony didn't relax or give himself fully to it. As soon as Barrett let him, he continued with, "All I know is that you've made me want pleasure for the first time in my life, and even though it goes against my better judgment as a duke and a man of many responsibilities, I need satisfaction from you."

Barrett was poised above him, like a wolf who had pinned its prey to the ground. He blinked for a moment, then fell into the most delicious laughter Anthony had ever heard. "Those may be the most romantic words anyone has ever said to me."

"No, they are not," Anthony protested, one eyebrow raised, chest heaving with desire. "They were rubbish."

"They were beautiful," Barrett argued, tugging at the tie holding Anthony's banyan closed. "You are beautiful."

"At the moment, I do not feel beautiful," Anthony admitted, shivering in anticipation as Barrett began to unwrap him. "I feel utterly out of my depth and mad and as though I am in serious danger of grievously disappointing you and myself."

Barrett answered his spewed words by undoing his tie completely and spreading the front of Anthony's banyan wide open to reveal his naked body to full sight. Anthony's cock was already hard and stood up against the flat of his stomach. Barrett took in the sight of him, fire and hunger lighting his eyes.

"You could never be a disappointment, Anthony," he said. It was the first time he'd called Anthony by his given name, and it felt as precious as any endearment. "You are magnificent."

As if to prove his point, he stroked the hand he wasn't using for balance up and down Anthony's torso, from his shoulder to his belly to his hip. He didn't hesitate at all to brush his fingertips over Anthony's aching cock or his hardening nipples. Every inch of Anthony ignited with pleasure at the touch. He couldn't help but groan, close his eyes, and press his head back into the bed.

"It feels so good," he nearly sobbed. "I didn't know being touched could feel so good. I didn't know any of this was so wonderful."

Barrett laughed softly at him—and yes, Anthony was well aware Barrett was laughing at him. He didn't care, though. There was something endearing about his lover laughing at him.

"I suspected that the only reason you said you did not understand the fascination some men had with sex was because you'd never found what truly arouses you before," Barrett said in a purr, continuing to study Anthony's body with his hand.

"This," Anthony let out in a rush of desperate emotion. "This arouses me. Very, very much."

"I can tell," Barrett said, mischief and joy in his voice. "Do you know what else I believe will arouse you?"

Anthony was too afraid to ask outright. All he could do was prop himself on his elbows and watch as Barrett slid off of the bed to kneel. He grabbed Anthony's knees and pushed them wide while pulling him right to the edge of the bed. Then Barrett stroked his hands up Anthony's thighs—which seemed to be a hundred times more sensitive than usual—to fondle his balls. He didn't stop there, however, not by a long shot. The blighter took the base of his cock in hand, then leaned forward to suck the tip into his mouth.

Anthony gasped out a curse that turned into a moan as Barrett

lavished the tip of his cock with attention. He wasn't certain which he enjoyed more, the sensations of pleasure that Barrett's lips and tongue created as Barrett pleased him or the sight of Barrett's mouth spread wide around his cock. Barrett didn't make it any easier for him to decide as he drew Anthony in deep, sucking and swallowing as he did, and glancing up to meet Anthony's eyes. It was the most erotic sight Anthony had ever seen combined with the headiest pleasure he'd ever felt, and it had him trembling and nearly weeping with arousal.

When Barrett began to move on his cock, Anthony moaned so loud he was certain he'd wake all the ghosts of his ancestors in the rafters. "God, that's good," he groaned. He tipped his head back for a moment, but missed the sight of Barrett taking him over and over, so he looked again. White-hot pleasure built within him at alarming speed until he found himself balanced on a dangerous precipice.

"Stop," he gasped, attempting to pull his hips away from Barrett's mouth. "It's too much, stop."

Blessedly, Barrett obeyed immediately. "You're close to coming, aren't you?" he asked, panting and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Yes," Anthony admitted, flopping to his back. He couldn't look at Barrett as he said, "I'm so afraid of climaxing too soon and disappointing you."

"You won't disappoint me," Barrett told him in a slightly less patient voice than before. He stood and quickly shed his clothes. "Believe me, nothing you could do would disappoint me. You could lose control and come all over my face and I would still adore it."

Anthony let out a strangled moan over the image of doing exactly that which leapt to his mind. "I detest being so out of my depth," he admitted in a voice that was far too vulnerable.

Barrett laughed low in his throat and climbed back onto the bed, fully naked now. He tugged Anthony to lay across the middle of the bed and resumed his wolf-and-prey position over him. "That is why we shall endeavor to get this first time out of the way," he said, dipping down to kiss Anthony.

As amazing and wonderful as the kiss was, Anthony was utterly distracted by the feel of Barrett's firm, masculine body against his as he lowered himself until their bodies were pressed together. Anthony loved the feeling so much he could hardly catch his breath. He loved the breadth of Barrett's chest against his and the flats of their bellies rubbing together. He loved the way their legs tangled as Barrett wedged himself between Anthony's thighs and scooped a hand down to lift one of Anthony's legs over his hip. And he most definitely adored the friction of their two, engorged cocks against each other, hot and hard.

“Why?” Anthony breathed between heady kisses, particularly as Barrett kissed his way to his neck and proceeded downward. “Why did I not know that this was what I wanted? Why did I waste so many years without this?”

Barrett kissed and licked one of Anthony’s nipples before lifting himself and grinning down at Anthony. “It is that blasted taskmaster duty, Anthony,” he said, wickedness in his eyes. “You spent too many years with him as your lover. It is now damn well past time that you took a different lover, one who will be so much better for you.”

Part of Anthony was certain he should argue with Barrett. Duty was paramount. But he found it impossible to think with his cock wedged against Barrett’s between their two bodies, and with Barrett’s tongue plundering his mouth. He didn’t want to think at all, he wanted to feel. He ran his hands all over as much of Barrett’s body as he could reach, including the man’s pert and fascinating arse. Not only did Barrett not flinch away from his touch, he reached a hand around to guide Anthony’s hands to explore farther and delve deeper. The sounds of approval and encouragement he made were so approving that Anthony thought he might go mad.

“Spread my cheeks,” Barrett panted his order. When Anthony obeyed, Barrett went on with, “Put your finger in my hole.”

Anthony did as he was asked, dizzy with excitement, his body throbbing, even though it was Barrett’s body he invaded. Barrett groaned and pushed against Anthony’s hand, sinking his finger in deeper. The squeeze was oddly arousing—although in that moment, absolutely everything was arousing.

Barrett bent down to kiss Anthony again, tightening around his finger, then reached over to the side. At first, Anthony had no idea what he was doing, but as it happened, Barrett was reaching for the jar he’d brought with him. He quickly uncorked the jar, then panted. “Give me your hand. *That* hand.”

Feeling utterly out of his depth, Anthony did as he was asked. Barrett grabbed hold of his hand and dipped his first two fingers into the slippery ointment inside.

“Now, put both of them in my hole,” Barrett ordered breathlessly.

Anthony did and was surprised at how much more easily he was able to slide them past the ring of muscle at Barrett’s entrance. He wasn’t entirely certain what the enjoyment could have been for Barrett, but judging by the way Barrett pressed into Anthony’s fingers, squirming as though shifting them on the inside for a specific purpose, there was a great deal of enjoyment to be had in the action.

“Not everyone likes this,” Barrett panted as he moved, “but I do. God, I do,” he groaned. He kissed Anthony frantically for a few moments, then abruptly pulled up. “I cannot wait anymore. I want

you to fuck me.”

Anthony gasped, then let out a deep roar of, “Yes.” A moment later, he blinked, sucked in a breath, and asked, “How?”

Barrett laughed, stole another kiss, then moved in earnest. “We’ll start as simply as possible,” he said as he pushed Anthony’s legs together and straddled his hips. “This way, I can control the movement while you learn what it feels like, and I’ll still have that glorious cock of yours deep inside me, just where I want it.”

His words alone had Anthony panting and sweating and throbbing for release. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, anything. I want that. Show me how to do it. Show me.” He was certain he sounded like a depraved and ravening beast, but seeing as it was the first time he’d ever felt like a ravening beast, he enjoyed it. Ravening beasts hadn’t been given nearly their due in his life.

Barrett reached for the jar again and took a large scoop of its contents. Anthony nearly came undone when he spread the slippery stuff across his cock. “This is to ease the way,” Barrett explained, panting impatiently as he did. “I recommend it in every instance, though there are some who claim it isn’t necessary. I think it is.”

Anthony nodded as though he were attending a lecture, simply because he didn’t know how else to react.

“A little here, a little there,” Barrett went on with a devilish grin, reaching behind him with the remaining ointment on his fingers. Anthony had a good idea of where he was spreading it. “And now,” he went on, shifting above Anthony and moving Anthony’s hand to hold his cock upright, “heaven.”

A tiny moment of panic struck Anthony as Barrett positioned himself with the tip of Anthony’s cock pressing against his hole. That panic blossomed into something Anthony couldn’t even describe as Barrett bore down on him, forcing Anthony’s cock past the resistant ring of muscle and then deep inside his body. Anthony burst out with a string of expletives as he thrust his hips up to meet Barrett’s downward movement. His eyes went wide as he was sheathed completely. That was bliss enough, but then Barrett began to move.

If Anthony had had any of his faculties about him in the moment, he would have reveled in the graceful, undulating movements of Barrett’s body or the wild expression of pleasure that pinched his face. He might have appreciated the sounds of utter pleasure that Barrett made as he rode him or delighted in the scents of their skin and soap and musk blending together. But all Anthony was aware of in the moment was how tight Barrett felt and how miraculously wonderful the friction their bodies created was. It was, as Barrett had promised, heaven.

Anthony cursed and groaned with pleasure, gripping Barrett’s hips

so hard he was afraid he would leave bruises. His own body found a rhythm to match Barrett's, and all too soon he felt the gathering storm of orgasm brewing in his groin. Barrett only made it worse when he reached for his own cock and stroked himself as he rode Anthony. It was obscene and carnal and beautiful, and when Barrett surprised him by coming all over Anthony's belly, Anthony lost his mind. Between the sight of Barrett transported with pleasure, the hot spill of his seed, and the contractions of his body that Anthony felt in his cock, he couldn't hold back a moment longer. He spilled his own seed deep within Barrett in what felt like a never-ending fountain of triumph.

"Fuck, yes," Barrett groaned, pitching forward and catching himself on his hands as Anthony thrust hard into him until he didn't have any energy left.

Even when he was spent and couldn't have raised a finger, let alone his cock again, Barrett held himself in place, keeping the two of them joined. With Charlotte, Anthony had always wanted to get away to wash as soon as possible, but with Barrett, he would have done anything to stay sheathed inside him for as long as possible. The stickiness between them as Barrett leaned down to kiss him like a madman was a badge of victory, and the sweat that slicked Barrett's back and sides as Anthony stroked and groped as much of him as he could reach was beautiful.

He loved it. He absolutely loved every moment of it, every sensation, every emotion. He never wanted to let Barrett go, even when he did eventually slide away from Anthony's body so that the two of them could tuck themselves in bed together the right way around. And he finally, finally understood how men could wreck themselves for pleasure. In fact, as he drifted off into a heavy sleep, Anthony could have sworn that he would be more than willing to wreck himself again and again for pleasure, as long as that pleasure was found with Barrett, his lover.

As Barrett stretched into wakefulness the next morning with a feeling of contentment like he hadn't known for years, his arm thumped against something. Or rather, someone. A smug grin spread across his face as he brushed his hand down Anthony's slumbering form. Unlike half of the other times Barrett had awoken in someone else's bed, he knew exactly where he was and how he'd gotten there, and he didn't feel a lick of shame or remorse about it. He felt as though he were exactly where he was supposed to be on a profound level.

That cheerful thought in mind, he rolled to his side to study the broad expanse of Anthony's back as he slept. Anthony lay on his stomach, his arms cradling the pillow above him, one knee bent. The position showed his fit body off to advantage, and Barrett couldn't resist pulling the sheet down to reveal the perfect mounds of Anthony's arse. There was something almost angelic about the sweet curves of Anthony's body as illuminated by the morning sunlight streaming in through the curtains. Barrett inched closer so that he could trace a hand over the muscles of Anthony's shoulders and the length of his spine. He caressed Anthony's arse lovingly, though the emotions that raged through him as he drew his finger down through his cleft was anything but sweet. The things he wanted to do to that arse could fill a salacious book that would end up banned from English shores.

With an impish grin, he decided to indulge in his fantasies. Careful not to wake Anthony too quickly, he crawled over Anthony's legs to position himself so that he could dip down and rain kisses across Anthony's arse. Anthony stirred a bit but didn't flinch or push himself away. Barrett grew bolder, nudging Anthony's legs apart, then spreading his cheeks so that he could draw his tongue across his hole.

Anthony sucked in a breath, and again Barrett thought he would pull away, or at the very least kick Barrett, but he didn't. So Barrett continued his exploration, wetting Anthony's hole with his tongue, tracing his way around the entire region, then pressing the tip of his tongue into Anthony's tight pucker.

Anthony moaned, then asked in a sleepy voice, "What are you

doing?" He shifted enough to glance at Barrett over his shoulder.

"Do you like it?" Barrett asked with a rakish grin, lavishing his tongue across Anthony's hole again before the man could answer.

"Yes," Anthony said on a long sigh, adjusting and widening his hips to accommodate the erection Barrett could just see pressed against the bed. "Though it seems a bit obscene."

Barrett laughed low in his throat as he continued to tongue Anthony's hole, which made Anthony flinch and let out another groan of pleasure. "Would you like me to stop?" Barrett asked a moment later.

"God, no," Anthony growled, lifting his arse. "I was grievously unaware that any of this was possible, and I certainly have no wish to stop now."

Barrett laughed again at Anthony's frankness, but rather than continuing with his current activity, he slid his way up Anthony's body, flipping him as he went so that the two of them lay face to face. He kissed Anthony's shoulder, neck, and jaw before capturing his mouth with searing intensity. Anthony responded with surprising enthusiasm for a man who had been convinced, up until the day before, that there was nothing particularly noteworthy about bedsport. He hooked one leg around Barrett's hip and raked his fingertips down Barrett's back, kneading his muscles.

"Why was this not offered to me as an option when I was choosing my course of study at Oxford?" Anthony asked with a sigh of mock irritation when Barrett let him breathe. "I'm certain I would have come first in all my classes."

"A gentleman always ensures his partner comes first," Barrett replied with an imperious lift of one eyebrow.

Anthony laughed. The sound and the sight of it lifted Barrett's spirits to towering levels. He hadn't known Anthony to laugh so freely and unabashedly in all the time he'd known the man. And even though that length of time was short, he had the feeling Anthony rarely laughed in such a joyful manner. It wasn't merely laughter. He moved to cradle the sides of Barrett's face and pulled him down for another glorious kiss.

"For a man who was, essentially, a virgin until a few, short hours ago, you certainly are eager," Barrett grinned down at him as they took a moment to breathe. "I half expected you to be as shy and reticent as a parson's daughter."

"So did I," Anthony admitted with a hint of surprise. "This is terribly unlike me. But for a time last night I was convinced you had changed your mind and that you wouldn't come, and when you did...." He finished his sentence by pulling Barrett down for another all-encompassing kiss.

Anthony's eagerness made him feel as though everything were new and he, too, was learning the ways of passion for the first time. He rutted against Anthony's hip, their morning erections rubbing together in a way that had both of them moaning for release. In the past, Barrett had been content enough to spend one night with his partners and part ways in the morning with a handshake and a wink, but with Anthony he wanted nothing more than to stay right where he was. For a very long time indeed.

A thought somehow cut through the haze of desire that had enfolded him, and he lifted suddenly above Anthony, staring down at him with a suspicious look.

"Why did you think I wouldn't come last night?" he asked. As he did, he reached between them to take both of their cocks in his hand, stroking them together.

Anthony grunted and thrust into his fist, wriggling as he did and driving Barrett near to the edge. "You seemed so out of sorts at supper," Anthony said, his words distracted, lust making his eyes heavy-lidded. "I thought you'd realized the mistake you'd made."

"This is not a mistake," Barrett panted, moving his hand and hips faster. He wondered how quickly he could bring Anthony off, if his bedmate was as primed and ready as he was.

The conversation was momentarily forgotten as the two of them jerked and moaned and let themselves go. It was no surprise to Barrett that Anthony came first, spilling over Barrett's hand and his own belly with a blissful moan. Watching Anthony revel in his climax was more than enough to send Barrett over the edge himself, and within seconds, he added his own seed to the mess on Anthony's stomach.

"God, that was lovely," Anthony panted. "I am not certain I will ever be able to get enough of it."

"I know I won't," Barrett gasped, leaning down to kiss Anthony. Though as their mouths met and their hands roved each other's spent bodies, he wondered what had led him to make such a sweeping statement with so much certainty.

When they were lying side by side again, catching their breath, Barrett continued the conversation with, "I was troubled at supper last night because I received a letter from my sister late in the afternoon."

"Oh?" Anthony turned his head to blink questioningly at Barrett. There was something in his relaxed stance, one arm still above his head, his cheeks pink from orgasm and his lips red with kissing that did wild things to Barrett's heart.

"My sister, Sophia," Barrett began, reaching across to trace his fingertips over Anthony's lips, "has been in London for the Season. She and my mother have this ridiculous notion that it was my responsibility to accompany her, as I believe I've told you before."

“You have,” Anthony nodded, the pink of his cheeks turning even pinker as Barrett stroked his hand down Anthony’s chest to his belly and the evidence of the pleasure they’d just shared. “I happen to agree with them.”

Barrett’s eyes went wide. “How can you say such a thing?” He pushed himself up to one arm and looked at Anthony in mock horror. “Can you truly imagine me suffering through a London season on the arm of my sister?”

To Barrett’s dismay, Anthony looked genuinely disappointed instead of teasing as he, too, raised to one arm and said, “You are her brother. Your duty is to care for her and help ensure her future happiness.”

Barrett frowned and pursed his lips. “So you continue to be a slave to duty, I see. The night we’ve just spent has not changed that?”

Anthony sat up with a laugh. “The night we have just spent changes everything, and I believe you know it.” He stared down at himself as if realizing the messy state he was in, then glanced across the room at a small clock on the mantelpiece. “Blast. Winters will be here soon to help me dress. He cannot find you here.”

Barrett grinned fondly at Anthony, especially his backside, as he scrambled out of bed. “What do you think your faithful valet would say if he knew you’d spent a night of carnal delight with a man?”

“I could not begin to imagine,” Anthony said, walking swiftly across the room to the wash basin and beginning his ablutions. He turned back to Barrett as he sponged his torso—a sight Barrett found deliciously erotic—and said, “You are changing the subject. You had a duty to your sister and you neglected it. How do you plan to make amends?”

Barrett’s brow shot up, and he threw aside the bedclothes to climb out of bed himself. “I have neglected nothing,” he argued. “I did not ask to be responsible for a twenty-one-year-old chit with more ambition than sense any more than I asked to be born the eldest son of an earl who is doomed to inherit a mountain of trouble he has no inclination for.”

It was Anthony’s turn to gape at Barrett in surprise. “One does not get to pick and choose the duties one is born into, but that does not absolve us of responsibility.”

“Fine,” Barrett sighed impatiently. He grabbed the sponge from Anthony, dipped it into the washbasin, then proceeded to scrub the man from chest to thighs himself. “You take on the responsibility for my sister then, since you are so in love with duty.”

Their eyes met, and something soft and sheepish lit Anthony’s eyes. It was enough to have Barrett’s heart dancing a jig in his chest, though he rejected the implications of what that jig was. It was far too

soon to think of anything but enjoying Anthony's body for as long as the man would let him.

At last, Anthony sighed and shook his head. "I would have expected more from you." He turned his back to Barrett, not out of spite, but so that Barrett could wash it.

"I beg your pardon?" Barrett tried not to feel irritated as he washed Anthony's back, enjoying the trails of water that slipped down to Anthony's arse and disappeared into his cleft.

"You are an intelligent man, Barrett," Anthony said, piercing right to Barrett's heart by using his given name. "And a good one too. I see the way you are with my children. Francis and Eliza adore you. Would you callously ignore Eliza in her first season if she were your responsibility instead of mine?"

Barrett didn't like the tension that gripped his chest and gut. "You are not playing fair, Your Grace," he said, sliding his hand through the water trickling down Anthony's back to cup his arse and delve into his cleft.

Anthony jumped slightly, then twisted to look at Barrett over his shoulder. "And neither are you."

"Are you saying this is unfair?" Barrett asked with an impish grin, pressing a finger against Anthony's hole.

Instead of groaning with pleasure, Anthony fixed him with a flat look. "I meant that you are not being fair to your sister. In her hour of need, you abandoned her."

Guilt and frustration bit at Barrett's heels. "Fine," he said, tossing the sponge back into the washbasin, then reaching for a towel to throw at Anthony. "What would you have me do then? Sacrifice my own life and my pleasure to be at Sophia's beck and call? Where would that leave us, then?"

Anthony's expression flashed from indignation to tenderness and back again so quickly that Barrett could hardly keep up. "I am flattered that you think there is an 'us'," he said in a quiet voice, rubbing the towel over his chest.

"Do you want there to be an 'us'?" Barrett asked, feeling unaccountably like a schoolboy with his first *tendre*.

Anthony blushed and focused on drying himself off for a moment before saying, "Yes, I rather think I do."

"Then there's an 'us'," Barrett said with a smile, stepping close enough to pull Anthony into an embrace. He slanted his mouth over Anthony's kissing him for a moment before leaning back with a frown. "And 'we' are in the midst of 'our' first lover's quarrel," he went on. "I will not have you dictating to me what you think my duty is and how you think I should execute that duty."

"And I cannot believe that you would disregard the very real and

pressing concerns of your closest kin because you find your own pleasures to be more important,” Anthony volleyed back at him.

Barrett was stung not only by the possibility that Anthony was right, but by the worry that he might lose Anthony’s regard because he’d chosen to walk into his life instead of idling his time in London.

“What’s done is done,” he said, stepping away from Anthony and moving about the room to fetch his clothes from the night before and put them on. “The Season is over, and Sophia is apparently taking things into her own hands.”

“What does that mean?” Anthony asked as he finished drying and fetched his banyan.

Barrett shrugged. “I have no idea. She said an opportunity had come her way, but that could be anything from serving as an envoy to France to embroidering cushions for Italian orphans to taking up a post on the Canadian frontier.”

Anthony’s brow shot up. “Is that the sort of woman your sister is?”

Barrett finished fastening his breeches, then walked over to take Anthony’s face in his hands and to kiss him. “That is the sort of person everyone in the Landers family is,” he said, then kissed Anthony again. “You’ve taken a wily and unpredictable lover, Your Grace.”

Anthony said nothing, but his whole face lit with pleasure at the idea. The way he smiled at him had Barrett’s insides filling with light.

“You’d better go,” Anthony said a moment later, his voice hoarse. “Winters truly will be here at any moment, and I’m afraid I have a bit of work to do to hide the evidence of our activities.”

“All right,” Barrett said, kissing him one more time before heading back to the bed, where he’d left his shirt and banyan, and donning them. “I’ll go. But I refuse to stay away from you for long.”

“I doubt I’ll be able to keep my distance either,” Anthony said with a smile so sweet it made Barrett reassess every conclusion he’d drawn about the man. Yes, Anthony was proud and serious, but he had an affectionate and perhaps even playful side as well.

Barrett slipped out of his room and hurried back to his own room one hall over. He could hear activity in the house, but the hour was still early enough that it would only be maids and footmen going about their morning tasks. He was able to return to his guestroom, disturb the bed so that it looked as though he’d slept there, bathe, and dress for the new day, all without questions or suspicion. His gaze kept lighting on the letter from his sister as he cleaned himself up, though. He continued to detest the idea of that sort of duty, in spite of Anthony’s admonishment, but he had to admit to himself that he was fond of Sophia. He promised himself that as soon as their paths crossed once more, he would do everything he could to find her the husband she apparently wanted.

By the time he made it downstairs, Barrett was ready to declare a truce with Anthony on the subject of duty. His friends had other plans, however.

"Is something different about you this morning, dear brother?" Red asked Anthony as soon as they were all seated at the breakfast table.

Barrett had piled his plate high in order to renew his energy after the night's exertions, but the teasing glint in Red's eyes and the deep flush that came to Anthony's cheeks made him lose his appetite to indignation.

"Are you, perhaps, a bit jealous?" Barrett fired across the table to Red. There was no point in any of them pretending they all couldn't guess what had transpired. "Missing Lucas, perhaps?"

Anthony glanced up from his plate so suddenly that he fumbled his fork.

"I always miss Lucas," Red said with a shrug. "He's jolly good company and far more diverting than present company." He smirked triumphantly at Barrett, as if saying he preferred Lucas would hurt Barrett's feelings.

Barrett simply laughed. "Yes, I'm certain that's all it is," he said, exchanging a knowing look with Septimus.

Septimus kept his mouth carefully shut. "Keep me out of this," he said in a low grumble, looking at no one. "Unless congratulations are in order," he added, peeking up at Anthony.

"I cannot imagine what you mean," Anthony stammered, nearly dropping his teacup this time.

"Yes, you can, Tony," Red teased him. "We all can." He lifted his teacup to his brother in a salute.

Barrett couldn't help but laugh, especially as Anthony looked mortified to realize everyone knew their secret. Anthony surprised him again by adjusting to the situation with surprising grace. "Very well," he sighed. "You know. Now I would ask that you keep the information politely to yourselves and go about your business as though nothing at all has changed."

"I feel as though I've been told off," Red laughed, though he looked pleased.

"You will be told off if you persist in your tomfoolery," Anthony said, looking at his plate as he cut a piece of ham instead of at his brother. "I believe I continue to be the one in control of your purse strings, am I not?"

Barrett, Septimus, and Adam all laughed at the way Red sputtered in response to that.

The rest of breakfast continued in companionable chatter, and once everyone got up to go about their own business, Barrett found himself accompanying Anthony down the hall to his study.

"I should have time later this morning to join you for some pastime or another," Anthony said as they neared the study door.

"If only there weren't so many duties for you to take care of," Barrett said with a wry look.

Anthony fixed him with a stern stare, but instead of taking him to task for mocking responsibility, he sighed and shook his head. "We'll continue on where we left off later," he said, stroking a finger down the lapel of Barrett's jacket. "And Barrett?" he asked with sudden, darling vulnerability.

"Yes?" Barrett asked, feeling drawn to him like an iron filing to a magnet.

"Could we," he hesitated, biting his lip in the unconscious way he had, "could we perhaps try things the other way around tonight? We are permitted to do that, are we not?"

Any lingering irritation or upset Barrett had vanished instantly at the thought of initiating Anthony into taking the other role in their sexual congress that night. "Love, we can do it any way you'd like and then some," he whispered against Anthony's ear.

He stepped back and winked at the man before turning and walking off, leaving Anthony wanting more. He never could have imagined his summer would turn out to be as fascinating and indulgent as it had become.

If Anthony hadn't known better, he would have feared that some strange malady had afflicted him. He attempted to go about his business, reviewing reports from his tenants and catching up on journals containing information about the latest drainage techniques, as per the plans he and Mr. Shelton had discussed, but his thoughts refused to settle on one thing. Or rather, his thoughts wanted to settle on one thing, but it was the least appropriate thing they could have settled on.

He thrust his pen back into its holder after his fifth attempt to write notes about soil drainage had resulted in splattered ink across yet another sheet of paper. Spilling that ink reminded him a bit too much of other things that had spilled that morning and the night before. Thrusting his pen into its holder brought to mind the way Barrett's body had encompassed his needy cock the night before as well. Taken together, his travails with pen and ink resulted in him sprawled in his chair, gaze unfocused and a smile on his face as he envisioned what it might feel like that night when Barrett inserted his deliciously formed prick into his undefiled arse. Would it hurt? Would it be uncomfortable? Barrett had certainly enjoyed sheathing him. Anthony wouldn't soon forget the look of ecstasy on his lover's face as Barrett had ridden him to orgasm. Surely there was something in the design of the male body that made such things pleasurable, otherwise, why bother?

A knock sounded at the open door, and Anthony jerked out of his thoughts so fast he feared he might fall from his chair. It was only Redmond at the door, and Anthony had specifically asked that his brother come discuss the matter of the potential land sale with him, but that didn't stop Anthony from heating like a furnace and pulling his chair in closer to his desk so that his all-too perceptive brother didn't catch sight of his growing erection. What was the matter with him? He was a duke, as he'd taken to reminding himself every second of the day, by rote. He was supposed to be grave and reliable and in command of everything that came within his purview. He was not supposed to be flighty and wanton and unable to maintain a single serious thought in his addled head. Those repetitive arguments were

starting to wear thin now.

Red grinned as he strode into the room as if he could see Anthony's thoughts. "You wanted to speak to me?" he asked, moving to lounge gracelessly in one of the chairs in front of Anthony's desk.

Anthony was beyond grateful that Red hadn't coaxed him into standing or insisted they converse in the chairs closer to the fireplace—chairs with no means of concealing the lower half of his body and therefore his thoughts.

"Yes," Anthony said, clearing his throat and looking at everything on his desk in turn before taking the risk of meeting his brother's eyes. "I want to consult with you on this potential land sale Mr. Goddard was on about yesterday."

Red blinked as though surprised. "*That* is what you wish to talk to me about?"

"Yes." Anthony nodded definitively. His heart whispered to him that Red likely had the answers to all the other questions that had been plaguing him that morning as well.

As if Red could read his thoughts, he sent Anthony a wicked look and repeated, "That's what this is about? Land deals? Not *other things*?"

Anthony let out an impatient breath, dropping his shoulders. "I know you want to talk about *other things*, and I will confess that I could do with a bit of consultation on those things as well, but the potential sale of a part of Wodehouse Abbey's estate is more important."

"Are you certain about that?" Red asked, arching one eyebrow.

Anthony stared flatly at him, wondering if Barrett had taken his disdain for duty from Red or if Red had acquired the habit from Barrett. "Yes," he said. "I most certainly am."

Red grinned and looked as though he would dispute the point, but Anthony moved on before he could say anything.

"I wanted your opinion before I meet with Mr. Goddard again." He scooted forward, resting his folded hands on his desk. "While I frown upon Mr. Goddard's boldness at presenting himself to me without an appointment or introduction, I cannot simply dismiss his offer out of hand."

"Why not?" Red shrugged. "The man is an arse. Seymour can tell you all about him."

"Barrett already informed me of their rivalry." Only when Red's mouth twitched into a smile at Anthony's use of Barrett's given name did Anthony note his slip. He chose to ignore it. "I also find Mr. Goddard personally distasteful, but I am intrigued by the idea of selling a portion of the estate to an industrialist. If building a factory of some sort could bring employment to the people of the area, then I

feel that is something I must consider.”

Red shifted anxiously in his chair. “Tony, how many of these new factories springing up like weeds have you toured?”

“None,” Anthony was forced to admit, his back and shoulders going tense. “I would, of course, seek to tour one before making any final decision.”

“They are horrific places, or so I’ve been told,” Red said, leaning forward. “They are dirty. They may provide employment, but they destroy health in the process.”

“So you have not toured one yourself?” Anthony asked.

“No,” Red said with a wince, “but I know men who have. Some of the seamen I served with formerly worked in cotton mills or have loved ones employed in them. They prefer the dangers of a life at sea to the dangers of a power loom.”

Anthony nodded and frowned. “But if there’s a chance they could be of help to the region, that they could increase commerce in the area and improve the fortunes of one and all, certainly this is something I should consider.”

“I suppose you believe it is your duty to oversee the lives and welfare of every man, woman, and child in Yorkshire?” Red asked, leaning back in his chair again.

“Have you been speaking to Barrett?” Anthony mirrored his gesture, sending him the same sort of sly look Red was sending to him.

“About the topic of duty? A bit,” Red admitted with a nod. “About the topic of my stodgy, burdened, inhibited brother?” He grinned from ear to ear. “Also a bit.”

Anthony spent all of one second frowning at his brother before blowing out a breath of defeat and flopping back in his chair in an entirely un-duke-like manner. “As it turns out, I am not as inhibited as you might think,” he said, staring at his desk instead of meeting Red’s eyes.

“Yes, I assumed as much at breakfast this morning,” Red said, delight lacing his voice.

Anthony glanced sheepishly up at him. “You must think I’m the worst sort of fool.”

Red sat a bit straighter. “And why would I think that?”

“Because I have striven for years to be dignified and respectable, to run my affairs with efficiency and discretion, and now here I am, inviting your friend and shipmate to my bed like a puppy begging for a table scrap.”

Red made a snorting sound, as though trying not to laugh. “Are you telling me that you begged Barrett to bed you?”

Anthony’s face heated all over again. “Well, no, not precisely. He

asked if he could come to my room last night to discuss the attraction between us.”

“And?” Red was still having a hard time not laughing.

“And as soon as he entered my room, I threw myself at him,” Anthony admitted, wishing he could sink into the floor.

Red’s lips continued to twitch for a moment before he said, “I assume on the basis of yesterday’s conversation that that was the first time you were tugged by a man?”

As mortifying as it was, Anthony said, “I am not certain who tugged who, as it was my member that did the penetrating but with Barrett atop me.”

Red nodded, seemingly impressed, but still struggling not to laugh. “And what did you think?” he asked.

Anthony forced himself to meet his brother’s eyes fully. “That I have been missing something my entire life and now I’ve found it,” he said in a rush of emotion. “That I suddenly understand the fascination so many men have with carnal relations. That Barrett is the most wonderful, patient, sensual man of my acquaintance and I do not know what I would do without him.”

Red’s brow shot up. “So you’re fond of Barrett as well as randy for him?”

Anthony paused, then blinked. “Is that not the way these things are done?”

“Not necessarily.” Again, Red looked as though he wanted to laugh, but for far more joyous reasons and not just because he was poking fun at his brother. “I’m not certain I’ve ever considered myself in love, but I’ve passed many an enjoyable night with more than my fair share of handsome and willing lads before.”

“You’ve never been in love?” Anthony asked dubiously. “What about this Lucas fellow that has been mentioned a time or two.”

“I’m not in love with Lucas,” Red said in a rush, waving the idea away, shifting restlessly as he did.

“And I’m not in love with Barrett,” Anthony said, though it didn’t quite feel right. “I like him well enough.”

“Yes, I should say so,” Red laughed. He paused, then laughed harder. “Tony, what is the purpose of this awkward conversation?”

Grateful that his brother would bring them to some sort of point, Anthony sat forward and asked, “Am I mad?”

Red’s look turned sympathetic. “Why would you ask such a thing? You are the sanest man I know.”

“I feel so out of my depth,” Anthony went on. He huffed a wry laugh. “Even admitting that much to you seems utterly contradictory to everything I have held dear in my life. I have too many people depending on me—my children, my tenants, my staff, you—to indulge

in fancy, even for a moment, but I find that I cannot maintain any sort of focus this morning. I cannot rise to the tasks in front of me."

Again, Red barked a laugh. "I'd wager to guess that you're having no trouble rising at all."

"Redmond, be serious," Anthony told his brother with a flat look.

"Whatever for?" Red smiled. Anthony opened his mouth to rebuke him, but Red raised a hand and went on with, "We are all here on holiday, Anthony. That should include you as well. I know that you pride yourself on being honorable and responsible, but you, dear brother, are permitted to enjoy yourself. Especially with a man I esteem as highly as I esteem Barrett. Aside from you—and Bertram, of course—there is no man I regard more highly."

"Not even the fabled Lucas Salterford?" Anthony asked, soothed by his brother's thoughtful words to the point where he felt comfortable teasing Red mercilessly.

Red narrowed his eyes and thinned out his lips in a look Anthony was reasonably certain he'd seen in his own mirror a time or two. "Lucas is merely a friend and an occasional willing bedmate."

Anthony's brow shot up. "So you've done—" he wave his hand, still unable to speak about such things half as openly as Red and Barrett and their friends likely did, "—with Mr. Salterford?"

It was Red's turn to flush scarlet. "Sometimes it's just fucking, Tony. It feels good and brings both men off. It doesn't have to be love. You'd do well to keep that in mind when you and Barrett are mussing up your bedsheets later."

As embarrassing as the whole conversation was, Anthony found himself encouraged by his brother's words. Not just the words, but the very fact that he'd had the conversation with Red to begin with. It seemed strange that uncovering a whole new aspect of himself the way he had with Barrett would somehow bring him closer to his brother, but Anthony could feel that closeness growing. He and Redmond had something unique in common now, something they didn't share with their sisters or their brother.

It made him feel that he could, perhaps, be a better father to his children as well, as evidenced when the three of them ate their luncheon together in the nursery. Barrett had been invited as well, and for a few, lovely minutes in the middle of an ordinary Wednesday, Anthony was struck by an immense feeling of happiness and rightness. The four of them sitting around the small table in the nursery could be a family of sorts. It was a fanciful feeling and likely premature, since his understanding with Barrett was not even a full day old, but it filled Anthony with contentment all the same.

"What would you say to taking the children into Hull tomorrow?" he asked Barrett that evening, when Barrett joined him in his

bedchamber once everyone else had gone to bed. It was a strange question, considering the timing. Once again, the moment Barrett had stepped into the room and closed the door behind him, Anthony had flown to him and nearly pinned him against the wall in his haste to press as much of his body as he could against his lover. And yet, mentioning Francis and Eliza didn't seem as odd as it would have had Barrett been any other man.

Barrett laughed and pulled Anthony tighter into his arms, slanting his mouth over Anthony's and drinking in all the kisses Anthony could give him. Knowing what to expect this time, Anthony had stripped, washed, and dressed in his banyan in preparation, and all Barrett needed to do was to loosen the banyan's tie to be able to slide his hands around Anthony's sides to caress his arse. That simple gesture had Anthony growling wantonly before he'd given Barrett a chance to answer his question. How could he ever forgive himself for waiting so long to take a lover?

The answer whispered through him that he'd been waiting for Barrett.

"I think that sounds like a lovely idea, my darling, eager duke," Barrett said, clamping his hands over the mounds of Anthony's arse and pulling his cheeks apart wickedly.

Anthony gasped and purred, then broke down into sheepish laughter as he rested his forehead against Barrett's. "I am being ridiculous, I know," he said, plucking at the ties of Barrett's banyan and pushing it aside. He was delighted to discover Barrett was shirtless underneath and indulged in spreading his hands across Barrett's bare chest and enjoying the feeling of Barrett's wiry hair against his palms. "I should seek to uphold the dignity of my station, even when in the throes of passion, but I am like a child who has tasted honey for the first time and cannot get enough of it."

Instead of laughing, as Anthony had become accustomed to Barrett doing, Barrett made the most delicious sound of arousal. "I like you wanton and undignified," he said, pushing Anthony slightly to back him toward the bed. "There is no need for you to be a credit to your title when we are together." He pushed the banyan off Anthony's shoulders, letting it drop to the floor as they continued to the bed.

"Red said something similar this morning," Anthony confessed.

Barrett paused. "Red said that?"

"In a manner of speaking." Anthony continued to step backwards toward the bed, grabbing Barrett by his banyan and pulling him along. "He told me I should enjoy myself, even though I am a duke."

Now Barrett laughed. "I knew a captain once, very highly placed in order of precedence, who enjoyed having young men spank him and fuck him and pull his hair while he got to his knees and sucked them

off. The lower-ranked the better.” He shrugged out of his banyan and let it drop to the floor, then both he and Anthony worked through the falls of his breeches. “I think he was given a knighthood at some point too. A man’s rank in society in no way determines what he likes behind closed doors.”

Anthony paused as Barrett’s breeches loosened around his hips, a pang of self-consciousness hitting him. “I have yet to fully discover what I like,” he admitted, sliding his hands down to draw Barrett’s cock and balls out. “I’ve only just discovered how much I like this.”

Barrett grinned at him and flexed his hips so that he thrust into Anthony’s touch. “Shall we discover what it is you like together, then?” he asked.

Anthony had never been asked a more scintillating question. “Yes, please,” he hummed in return, then leaned into Barrett for a kiss.

There was so very much that Anthony felt he had to learn, but he had always prided himself on being a fast learner. Kissing was one thing that he believed he could become quite adept at, if he were given enough time to practice. He clasped a hand behind Barrett’s head and held him in place while he caressed Barrett’s lips with his own, then brushed the seam of Barrett’s mouth with his tongue until Barrett let him in. There was so much joy in the simple act of entwining their tongues together and tasting all that the other had to offer that Anthony was certain he would never grow tired of it.

He would never grow tired of the way Barrett’s hands felt as they traced the lines of his body like a sculptor would to bring a manly form out of a block of clay. Touch had never meant much of anything to Anthony before, but he’d never noted its absence until he experienced the bliss of his belly and chest flush against Barrett’s, or the way Barrett’s leg felt so right when hitched over his hip. He couldn’t, in hindsight, say he’d never noticed another man’s arse, but caressing Barrett’s and knowing he’d spilled his seed inside of him just the night before added eroticism to what had been nothing more than a pleasing configuration of muscle to him before.

“Thank you,” he panted against Barrett’s kiss swollen lips once the two of them had been standing there enjoying each other for untold minutes.

“For what?” Barrett asked with a smile, settling his arms around Anthony’s sides.

“For being brave enough to show me the joy and the wonder I had been missing,” he said, feeling suddenly sentimental. He stroked a hand across Barrett’s chest, playing with one of his nipples. “If you hadn’t been brazen enough to flirt with me, I might have gone my entire life without knowing this sort of pleasure was possible.”

“Heavens, Your Grace.” Barrett’s smile widened. “Those might be

the most touching words anyone has ever uttered to me, outdoing even your words from last night.”

Anthony hummed. “Touching, yes,” he said, lowering his hand all the way to Barrett’s balls and testing their weight in his palm.

He felt them tighten and draw up as Barrett leaned in to devour him with another kiss. The more Barrett gave him, the more Anthony wanted. It was as though a single match had been lit, but instead of being used to light a candle, it had been used to ignite a cannon.

“I need to try tasting you,” he panted against Barrett’s mouth, then pulled away a bit. “Like you did with me last night.”

A spark came to Barrett’s eyes that was downright devilish. “I will never say no to having my cock sucked. But have a care. It is a skill that needs developing before you’ll be able to take all of me, like I did for you.”

“All the more reason to start.” Anthony was surprised at how much like a coquette he sounded.

He sank awkwardly to his knees and was immediately overcome by a wave of uncertainty. He’d always considered himself one of the most competent men he knew, a man who could command others and who knew precisely what to do in any situation. But there he was, on his knees, Barrett’s stiff prick mere inches from his face, and he wasn’t certain how to proceed.

“Take your time,” Barrett said, stroking Anthony’s hair and adjusting to a comfortable stance. “I am at your disposal, Your Grace.”

Anthony glanced up at him with a sardonic look. “Of all the times to address me formally.”

Barrett laughed, though the fire in his eyes had grown to a degree that was overwhelmingly wicked. “I’ve always wanted a duke on his knees before me.”

“A duke who doesn’t know what he’s doing,” Anthony said with a touch more self-deprecation than he’d intended.

As if to direct him, Barrett took hold of the base of his cock and held himself out to Anthony. The movement was commanding and erotic, and it sent a shiver down Anthony’s spine. He moved forward, opening his mouth and licking the moisture from the tip of Barrett’s cock. It tasted musky and rich, but what was more arousing was the way Barrett caught his breath, his hand fisting in Anthony’s hair.

Encouraged by the reaction, Anthony slipped Barrett’s entire tip into his mouth, using his tongue to trace the large and invasive shape once he had his mouth around it. Barrett let out a groan, which shot straight to Anthony’s own cock. He tried to remember the specifics of how Barrett had pleased him the night before so that he could repeat them. He closed his hand around the base of Barrett’s shaft, then bore down on him.

His enthusiasm ended with him gagging as Barrett became too much too soon.

"Easy, easy," Barrett gasped. "Just a bit at a time. We'll work our way into more with time."

Anthony hummed and closed his eyes for a moment at the concept. Time. Time implied more than just one night, more than a handful of encounters. Time implied that he might have this sweetness and so much more for as long as he could hold onto it.

That made him bold, and he spent the next several minutes lavishing as much of Barrett's prick as he could with his mouth and tongue, learning the shape of his lover and how holding Barrett in his mouth for so long caused his jaw to ache in a sinful way. He wanted to master what he was doing the same way he had conquered every other difficult challenge in his life, but before long, Barrett was trembling slightly, and Anthony could feel his control waning.

"I don't want to fill you this way," Barrett hissed, pushing Anthony's shoulders back gently. "You said you wanted to switch roles, so I want to fill that tight arse of yours with all of me."

Between the erotic command flashing in Barrett's eyes and the way Anthony's body ached for release already, he was more than ready for it. "Tell me," he said breathlessly, standing. "Tell me what to do. I am yours to use in any way you want me."

Barrett growled possessively and grasped a handful of hair at the back of Anthony's head before pulling him in for a savage kiss. "I am going to show you pleasures that you've never dreamed of," he promised with a hungry grin. "Turn around and bend over the bed with your legs spread."

Anthony's breath caught in his lungs and his heart raced like the wind as he did as Barrett said, turning and assuming the position Barrett had asked for. He wasn't so ignorant that he didn't know why he was in the position or what would happen next, but a hundred questions jumped to his mind all the same as Barrett retrieved the jar that he'd brought with him the night before.

"I'm surprised Winters didn't find that," Anthony commented as he braced himself on his forearms, holding his hips high.

"Perhaps he did see it and simply didn't comment about it." Barrett turned back to him, jar in hand, and caught his breath. "Dear God, Anthony, are you attempting to make me lose my sanity?"

Anthony blinked nervously and shifted his hips. "Am I positioned incorrectly? I knew I would do it wrong."

Barrett chuckled as he returned to stand behind Anthony and spread a bit of the substance from the jar over his cock. "No, love. You're presenting yourself to me as if to say, 'here is my gorgeous arse and hungry hole, please fuck me until I cannot remember my name'."

Anthony laughed and hung his head. "What I am saying in actuality is, 'Oh Lord, please forgive me for being utterly ignorant in the ways of pleasure and allow me to please my lover tonight'."

Barrett laughed loudly, then set the jar aside. "Could this be the first time a duke has ever appealed to the Almighty for the ability to be a good fuck?"

"Likely not," Anthony said with a shrug. "In spite of my own woeful ignorance and inexperience, I am beginning to think there have been a great number of dukes in the past who have enjoyed just as—"

His statement ended in a sharp gasp as cool ointment met his hole. It was supplied by Barrett's fingers, and a moment later, one of those fingers pressed inside of him, making Anthony groan. His already hard cock bobbed impatiently beneath him as he flexed into the sensation Barrett was causing.

"It is imperative that you relax as much as possible," Barrett said, bending over to kiss Anthony's back even as his finger continued to work. He added a second finger, which caused Anthony to clench for a moment, but Barrett had just told him to relax, so he did. "Yes, love, just like that. Different men react differently, but there will be some resistance. It will burn a little at first. It may be uncomfortable, but if you relax into it and think open thoughts, I promise you, it will feel divine in the end."

"Think open thoughts?" Anthony asked with an anxious laugh, glancing over his shoulder.

"Precisely." Barrett added a third finger to the slow, steady, thrusting movements of his hand. "Open thoughts."

It all seemed utterly mad. A friend of his brother's, who he was now excessively fond of, had several of his fingers inside of his arsehole, and in a moment, he was going to put his cock in there as well. Anthony was about to let a man bugger him, and rather than being appalled, he was hungry for it, desperate for it. His cock dripped onto the bedclothes beneath him, and he was seized by the powerful urge to take himself in hand so that he could bring himself off once Barrett was inside of him.

"Ready?" Barrett asked, bringing the tip of his cock to Anthony's hole.

"Yes," Anthony moaned, feeling as though that single syllable encompassed a universe of emotion and discovery.

Barrett pushed, and Anthony held his breath. He tensed, forced himself to relax, tensed again when Barrett began to breach him, then muttered a curse under his breath.

"We don't have to do this, you know," Barrett said, breathless and tight. "There are plenty of other ways we can enjoy ourselves without

penetration, or you could just top me, since I—”

“Just shove it in, damn you,” Anthony shouted, bursting into laughter as he did.

He’d thought he was about to lose his mind before, but when Barrett did as he’d commanded, pushing his cock in as much as Anthony’s body could take him, then pulling out so that he could thrust in again and take more, Anthony could not even remember what his mind was, let alone lose it.

Barrett worked slowly at first, easing Anthony into the congress and giving him plenty of time to relax as he’d been instructed to. It was uncomfortable at first, but there was something impossibly satisfying about the burn that Barrett had warned him about. And as he adapted, glorious sensations of fullness and connection filled him.

“Oh, that’s nice,” he groaned, lifting his hips to meet Barrett’s thrusts more fully and balling his hands into fists in the bedclothes.

“Do you want more, Your Grace,” Barrett teased him.

Anthony was tempted to either cast aspersions on Barrett or tell him off for being so formal, but a twist of mischief within him chose to take advantage of the situation to truly let go. “Yes, you cur, I order you to give me more. I command you to fuck me like a duke should be fucked.”

Anthony’s shock at his boldness lasted for only a moment, because after that short time, Barrett gave him everything he’d asked for. He went from moving slowly in and out of him to slamming repeatedly into him with thrusts so hard Anthony could hear the slap of flesh that accompanied each one. Barrett gripped his waist hard enough to bruise and tilted Anthony’s hips up to an angle that allowed him to mercilessly have his way with him. It was brutal and wicked, and Anthony moaned and cried out like a wolf howling at the moon, particularly when Barrett started pounding against a spot within him that felt like heaven itself. It was every bit as magical as Red had implied it would be.

Anthony wasn’t entirely certain when he started to come, all he knew was that it was the most magnificent thing he’d ever experienced in his life. He didn’t ever want it to end, and even though he was certain it was a trick of his mind, he didn’t think it would end. His balls gave up everything they had and then some, and just when his oversensitive body began to howl in protest, Barrett made the most tantalizing sound of pleasure and jerked hard into Anthony, filling him with his essence.

It was so astoundingly good that once they were finished, Anthony could only wilt onto the ruined coverlet as Barrett splayed on top of them.

“Well then, Your Grace,” Barrett panted against his ear. “What do

you think of that?"

Anthony wasn't certain he could summon up the powers of speech, let alone form a coherent thought. "Yes," he managed to pant, filling the single word with a depth of meaning. "Glorious."

They lay like that, catching their breaths, for a few more minutes until they had the presence of mind to crawl beneath the sheets the proper way. Once they were correctly situated, they entwined themselves together, sharing tender kisses that Anthony didn't ever want to end.

"So what now?" he asked as he felt sleep creeping up on him. "Do we continue that way or do we proceed as we did last night?"

Barrett laughed gently, brushing his fingertips across Anthony's cheek. "Whatever do you mean, love?"

Anthony shrugged one shoulder slightly, feeling out of his depth all over again. "Are we required to choose one of us for the receiving role and one for the giving and to hold to that? Is that how these things work?"

"No." Barrett seemed to find him desperately amusing. He kissed his way all around Anthony's face before settling on his mouth for one, long, searing kiss. "We can switch back and forth as much as you'd like, darling," he went on. "There are no rules in love."

Anthony hummed and nodded as his eyes closed in spite of his efforts to stay awake. No rules in love. Was it love? He had no idea. All he knew was that whatever it was, he wanted so much more of it.

By the end of the week, Barrett was certain he'd opened Pandora's Box where Anthony was concerned. For a man who had been ambivalent toward anything that occurred in the bedroom, Anthony was suddenly insatiable. The stoic and responsible duke who prided himself on duty and discretion wanted to try everything. *Everything*. He and Anthony would go out for a ride in the afternoon and end up with one of them against a tree while the other attempted to nail them to it as though they were a notice offering a reward for an outlaw. They went swimming in the evening and found themselves on the secluded terrace again with Anthony challenging himself to see how deeply he could swallow Barrett's cock. Or one particularly inventive time when they'd stumbled into a position where they could both suck and swallow each other simultaneously. When Sebastian casually mentioned a certain smugglers' cave, Barrett and Anthony found themselves adding the echoes of their impassioned cries to the roar of the waves from deep within that cave. And that was all without taking into consideration Barrett slept in Anthony's bed every night.

"I'm beginning to think that I've broken you somehow," Barrett said early one morning, a week after the first night he'd spent in Anthony's bed. He'd still been half asleep when Anthony had reached for him, tugging Barrett to rest overtop of Anthony's already primed and ready body.

"Broken me?" Anthony asked, wrapping his legs around Barrett's hips and sliding his hands up and down the planes of Barrett's back. "Fixed something fundamentally damaged within me is more like it." He scraped his nails up Barrett's sides, causing Barrett to suck in a breath of arousal, then he grabbed Barrett's face to pull him down for a kiss.

Barrett couldn't say no to that. He laughed softly, enjoying the reverberations throughout his whole body, and slanted his mouth over Anthony's. He knew his lover's body and his kisses so well now, and he was immensely pleased with the progress Anthony had made. The way their bodies fit together so perfectly and the way their hearts sometimes seemed to beat in concert with one another filled Barrett with a contentment he'd never known.

"I know your secret, Your Grace," Barrett grinned down at Anthony's kiss-swollen lips and his passion-hazed eyes.

For a moment, Anthony tensed with worry. "My secret?"

Barrett kissed a light trail across Anthony's cheek, pecking the tip of his nose before continuing to his other cheek. "You pretend to be grave and dour, you act as though the weight of the world on your shoulders is the only thing of importance to you and as though rationality is paramount, but you, Anthony Wodehouse, are all heart."

Anthony met his statement with a lazy smile. "Not *all* heart, surely," he said, arching his hips into Barrett's so that their cocks rubbed together. "I have recently discovered the manifold uses and the charm of a certain other organ."

Barrett laughed salaciously and kissed Anthony's lips. "Yes, you have."

He kissed his way down Anthony's neck and across his shoulder to his chest, pausing to lavish attention on one nipple. From there, he continued his trail down Anthony's body, circling his navel with his tongue, then adjusting so he could move farther south still. The bedsheets covered him as Anthony spread his legs so Barrett could fondle his balls and draw his cock into his mouth. The moan of pleasure that met Barrett as he pushed Anthony's foreskin back and bathed his tip with his tongue was better than any prize Barrett had ever won. Anthony was already slick with anticipation, and judging by the shameless sounds he made, he wasn't going to last long.

Barrett had Anthony's prick halfway down his throat when he heard a quick knock, followed by someone opening the blasted door and marching right in. Anthony's moan of ecstasy immediately turned into a shout of shock.

"Winters! Good God, man, get out at once, get out!" Anthony ordered in a voice filled with equal parts terror and fury.

Barrett nearly choked, uncertain whether to laugh or wince with embarrassment. He flattened himself under the sheets as best he could, but Winters would have to be an utter muttonhead not to realize Anthony had a man between his legs.

"I am so terribly, terribly sorry," Winters said. Barrett had the feeling from various small shuffling sounds that Anthony's valet had turned to face away from the bed. He also had the impression that Winters wasn't surprised. "I would never dream of interrupting while you are entertaining, Your Grace."

Barrett nearly snorted with laughter.

"It is just that I believed it imperative for you to know immediately that your aunt, Lady Grosmont, and her companion arrived late last night, after the house had gone to bed," Winters continued.

Anthony's whole body went rigid. "My aunt?" he asked in a wary

voice.

“Yes, Your Grace.” Barrett heard more restless shuffling. He inched up so that he could rest his head against the flat of Anthony’s belly, and to his surprise, he felt Anthony’s hand settle over his head affectionately.

“Did she say why she has come?” Anthony asked, wriggling a bit in discomfort.

“No, Your Grace,” Winters said. “But she and her companion have already awakened and are in the breakfast room. I suggest that you and Lord Copeland rise and make yourselves presentable so that you may greet them.”

Barrett winced against Anthony’s belly. So Winters knew. More than likely, the entire staff of Wodehouse Abbey knew he and Anthony had been carrying on. They hadn’t been as discreet as they could have been, and once one servant discovered a secret, everyone in the house knew it. At least Winters didn’t sound scandalized or disapproving.

There seemed nothing for it but to come clean, so Barrett pushed himself the rest of the way up Anthony’s body until his head and shoulders popped above the top of the sheet, then turned to his side beside Anthony. “Thank you, Winters,” he said with a cheeky grin. As long as he was caught, he might as well gloat about his conquest. “I will ensure that His Grace is washed and dressed and fit for his aunt’s company forthwith.”

As Barrett had inferred, Winters was, indeed, facing away from the bed. “Thank you, my lord. Your Grace, I will return in a few minutes to assist with your wardrobe.”

With that, Winters quickly and carefully left the room.

Anthony let out a mortified groan and threw an arm over his eyes. Barrett snorted with laughter and rested his head on Anthony’s shoulder for a moment.

“Please, blessed God in heaven above, send lightning to strike me dead in this moment,” Anthony appealed in a strained voice.

That only made Barrett laugh harder. “How long has Winters been in your employ?” he asked.

Anthony removed his arm and turned his head to look at Barrett. “A bit over five years.”

Barrett grasped Anthony’s free hand and wove their fingers together. “You realize he’s probably known since that first night.”

Anthony winced and groaned a second time.

Barrett leaned in to kiss his cheek, then rolled out of bed. “Come on, up you get. If Winters hasn’t tendered his resignation already, I doubt he will now. He seemed almost protective of you just now.”

Anthony dragged himself out of bed as well, as Barrett fetched his

banyan from the chair under the window. "I would wager that the entire staff knows," he said in a long-suffering voice. Once he reached his washstand, he stopped and tipped his head to the side. "That would explain why they have kept a respectful distance of late, and why the gardener was suspiciously absent from the orangery that one afternoon when I was certain he was due to be working there." He blinked, then continued with, "Or why the door to my study was open one moment then closed the next yesterday when you rode me on the sofa." His face went bright red at the memory.

It was a memory Barrett wouldn't soon forget either. "Your staff cares for you, and they are protective of you," he said with a shrug. "They will not judge you harshly for this. I would not be at all surprised if they are overjoyed to see you so happy for a change."

"But I've always been happy," Anthony said, pausing in the middle of wetting his sponge in the washbasin.

"Have you been?" Barrett asked, one eyebrow arched.

Anthony continued wetting his sponge and soaping it for his bath. He frowned and said, "I thought I was. Now, I am not so certain."

Barrett stepped over to him, circled his arms around Anthony's bare torso, and kissed his cheek. "You are happy now, and that is all that matters."

Anthony hummed with contentment and turned his head so that he could kiss Barrett's lips, but as Barrett stepped away, he sensed a degree of uncertainty from Anthony, as if the man was questioning the entire nature of happiness and whether that was something that fell within the purview of a duke. As frustrating as that was, Barrett also found it endearing. He smiled warmly at Anthony's naked back as the man started bathing—and let his gaze rest on the firm mounds of Anthony's perfect arse for a moment—before saying, "I am returning to my room to wash and dress. I'll see you downstairs in a bit."

"Hopefully I will already have settled whatever it is my aunt has come here for by then," Anthony said with a sigh.

Barrett chuckled, then turned to leave the room. Every other morning, he had crept back to his own room one floor down with a bit of caution, careful not to be seen or heard by the servants or guests alike. But now that it was obvious the entire household knew full well that he and Anthony were lovers, he strode boldly from one floor to the other, his head held high. It was almost a disappointment that no one was about to see him.

He took his time with his morning ablutions. As far as he'd been able to glean in the time that he'd been at Wodehouse Abbey, Lady Grosmont was Anthony's closest relative on his father's side. She had quite a bit of influence with Anthony and with the children. Lady Grosmont had been the one to hire a dancing master for Francis and

Eliza, even though they were a bit too young to be thinking about balls and the like. Eliza had informed him once that Lady Grosmont would sponsor her coming-out one day. Barrett wasn't certain what to expect, but it was clear the woman was a powerful influence with the Wodehouse family, so he was eager to make as positive an impression as possible.

What he was not prepared for was to overhear an argument between the lady in question and Anthony before he had even reached the stairs.

"Madam, I am highly sensitive to the vital role you play in my family and your care for our welfare, but you simply cannot arrive uninvited and unannounced in the middle of the night in such a manner," Anthony was in the middle of telling the woman, and by the sound of his voice, his patience had already worn thin.

"Not invited?" a matronly voice answered him. "Are you to tell me that I am no longer invited into the home in which I was born and raised?"

"No, that is not what I am saying at all, dear aunt," Anthony answered her, patience clearly drawn tight.

"Then what are you saying, young man?"

Barrett rounded the corner at that moment and gazed down onto the powerful countenance of a grey-haired woman in a fashionable gown staring imperiously at Anthony, her arms crossed. She was just as tall as Anthony, and there was a resemblance that was hard to miss. Lady Grosmont had a strong presence that brought a grin to Barrett's face. He liked the woman at once, in spite of the way she was vexing Anthony. He had always liked a woman powerful enough to stand up for herself.

"I am saying, Aunt Georgiana, that the Abbey is already filled with guests and more are expected at any time, as soon as their final business with the Admiralty is completed," Anthony answered her.

"Nonsense," Lady Grosmont huffed as Barrett made his way down the stairs. "This house has dozens of guestrooms. There is more than enough room for a large and merry house party, to which I and my companion, Lady Sophia, will make a perfect addition."

Barrett nearly stumbled down the last few stairs, not just because Lady Grosmont invoked the name of his sister, but because Sophia herself stepped forward from the parlor just off the front hall and smiled up at him at that moment.

"Barrett. How good to see you again, dearest brother," Sophia greeted him with a steely smile and a flash of mischief in her eyes.

Barrett's jaw flapped wordlessly. Anthony whipped around to stare at Barrett in shock for a moment, then glanced on to Sophia, then back to his aunt.

“Sophia, darling.” Barrett recovered swiftly enough to make it to the bottom of the stairs and across the hall so that he could greet his sister with a kiss to each cheek. “What in blazes are you doing here?” he asked her in a tight whisper as they stood close.

“The season has ended, and as I was not fortunate enough to receive a proposal, I have taken a position as companion to Lady Grosmont,” Sophia explained, determination sparking in her eyes. She glanced past Barrett to share a wicked grin with Lady Grosmont. Both women were clearly in the midst of what they believed to be a coup.

“Let me show you around the house,” Barrett said, cupping his sister’s elbow and goose-stepping her down the hall. He exchanged a leery look with Anthony as he went.

“Do you still believe me to be an interloper in your house now?” Lady Grosmont asked Anthony as Barrett shuffled Sophia on. “It would appear that my companion is the sister to one of your friends.”

Barrett didn’t like the sound of that at all, but he trusted Anthony to deal with his aunt while he took care of his sister.

As soon as he’d ushered her to one of the smaller, family parlors at the end of the hall that looked out into the garden, he spun Sophia to face him and asked, “What the devil are you up to, Soph?”

“Why did you not tell me you were friends with a duke?” Sophia hissed in return, stepping closer to Barrett as though the two of them were part of a conspiracy together. “Imagine my surprise when I inquired about the address you gave me as your summer residence, only to discover it was the country estate of a duke. An unmarried duke at that. A *duke*, Barrett!”

“Malton is the brother of my friend, Lord Beverly,” Barrett, said, tugging anxiously at the hem of his jacket. He was infinitely more than a friend now, but one simply did not discuss such things with one’s younger sister.

“The two of you seemed on friendly terms just now,” Sophia argued. “I did not detect a hint of formality between the two of you.”

Barrett fought not to wince outwardly. He and Anthony may have inadvertently given away more than they intended by not saying a word to each other and behaving so casually in each other’s presence.

“If you have come all the way to Yorkshire with the aim of engaging yourself to Malton, you’ve come on a fool’s errand,” he told Sophia.

“And why is that?” Sophia’s back snapped straight, as though he’d suggested she didn’t have it within her power to nab a duke. “I was well-regarded in London this past season, and the only reason I did not land a husband was because you were not there to advance my cause and enter into negotiations on my behalf.”

Barrett sighed and rubbed a hand over his eyes. There it was again,

that monster Duty. "Soph, you know I have no stomach for London society. I simply cannot navigate it. I would have been a detriment to you and not a help."

"Nonsense." Sophia swatted his arm. "You are handsome and charming, you are adept at the art of conversation, and you are a war hero. I'd wager you have dozens of contacts, thanks to the navy, and that you know more than a few eligible former officers. But none of that matters now," she rushed on before Barrett could protest. "You are friends with a duke. A handsome, prosperous, widower duke. His aunt informs me he is in need of a wife."

"No," Barrett said, shaking his head. "You will not set your sights on Malton."

"I would make a perfect duchess, Barry," Sophia protested. "Mama has prepared me for a position like this since birth. I am well-read, proficient at organizing a household, and of a sweet disposition." That last bit was spoken with a look of such feigned innocence that Barrett couldn't help but burst into laughter.

"You are a minx, Sophia, and you always have been," Barrett said, leaning in to give his sister another kiss on her cheek. "You will make some man a lively and unpredictable wife someday, but not the Duke of Malton."

"I defy you to tell me why not." Sophia held her head high.

Barrett scrambled for an answer that would not shock his sister's sensibilities or reveal anything Anthony was not ready to have revealed. "Because, contrary to a certain elderly lady's suppositions, Malton is not in need of a wife," he said. "He has an heir already, and he is deeply occupied with matters of his estate."

"All of which are reasons why he should remarry," Sophia argued. "It is just as Lady Grosmont said. Malton needs a woman to manage his household, organize his affairs, and be a mother to his children."

Of all things, the thought that Francis and Eliza could be watched over by anyone other than Anthony or him did not sit well with Barrett, even though Sophia was his beloved sister. He was hardly the sort to be a mother to the children, but he was excessively fond of them, and the thought of continuing on in their life as a dear friend warmed his heart.

"Malton is not for you," he told his sister with a sigh. "Pursuing him will only result in disaster."

Sophia let out an impatient sigh and crossed her arms. "If I did not know better, I would say that you wished to keep the Duke of Malton all to yourself."

Barrett's face and neck went hot he was desperately worried he'd give himself and Anthony away. "That is not what I am saying at all," he told his sister with impatience that wasn't entirely feigned. "I am

simply saying that I have come to know the man in the last fortnight, and he is not inclined to remarry. He takes duty very seriously, and remarrying would only be a distraction from said duty."

Sophia arched an eyebrow. "One might, in fact, argue that it is the duty of a duke to remarry."

Barrett wondered if Lady Grosmont had said as much at some point in her acquaintance with Sophia. Seeing as Sophia, like him, had never been interested in responsibilities before, Barrett found it highly likely.

"Please, Soph," Barrett said with a sigh, feeling as though he were losing the argument. "I beg of you not to set your sights on Malton. It will not end well."

"I disagree," Sophia said, tilting her chin up and taking a step toward him. "I think it will end very well for me, one way or another. I have arrived, dear brother. I told you I would take matters into my own hands, and I have. You cannot shirk your responsibilities toward me any longer. There is one thing I know for certain. I have arrived at Wodehouse Abbey, and I will not leave until I am engaged."

“**A**nd then my dear sister informed me that if I did not assist her in securing Anthony’s hand, she will take drastic measures to secure it for herself,” Barrett complained to Anthony and Red later that afternoon, when the three of them had finally had a chance to slip away into the garden together for a serious conversation.

The only place they’d been able to find where they were relatively certain not to be disturbed was the orangery, but they had been forced to interrupt Peterson, the gardener’s work to do so. Now that he was aware of the lengths his staff had gone to in order to accommodate him, Anthony’s gut pinched with guilt. These were the sorts of disasters that personal indulgence could lead to.

“Dare I ask what your sister considers ‘drastic measures’ to be?” Anthony asked with one eyebrow raised as he paced up and down the brick path in the center of the small, glass building.

Barrett sighed and shoved a hand through his hair. “I’m too afraid to guess. Sophia always has been too daring for her own good.”

“Perhaps she might attempt to creep into Anthony’s bedchamber in the middle of the night?” Red suggested, breaking into snorting laughter as he did.

Both Anthony and Barrett sent him withering looks, and Anthony’s chest squeezed tight at the prospect. “She wouldn’t, would she?” he asked Barrett, biting his lip slightly.

Barrett’s entire countenance turned amorous as he stared at Anthony’s mouth. Anthony had only recently been made aware of the unconscious habit he had of biting his lip when he was anxious. Barrett had pointed the tick out shortly before advancing on him and proceeding to show him just how arousing he found the habit. Anthony’s jaw had been sore for an hour after that demonstration, but he had never been happier.

As if sensing Anthony’s thoughts, Barrett shook his head and forced himself to glance away, though his lips twitched into a smile as he did. “I wouldn’t put it past Sophia to try anything,” he admitted with a sigh. “She is the most determined young woman I’ve ever known, and she has no sense of propriety.”

“A trait that runs in your family, perhaps?” Red suggested, his grin

broadening.

Anthony glanced to his brother with what he hoped was a quelling look, but it didn't seem to do any good. Red leaned against a low, brick wall within the orangery as Anthony and Barrett paced back and forth, crossing each other's paths from time to time. Red seemed to be enjoying the ridiculous predicament a little too much.

Anthony ignored Red's jibe at Barrett. He sighed, pausing as he and Barrett came face to face, and shrugged. "There is simply nothing for it but to be cautious and keep our distance from each other until my aunt and your sister can be dealt with."

Barrett gaped at him as though Anthony had taken out a knife and plunged it into his gut. "You cannot be proposing that we go our separate ways already."

"God, no!" Anthony exclaimed in horror. A moment later, his expression softened and his lips twitched before he went on with, "I've only just been invited into this garden of delights. I've no intention of casting myself out again so swiftly."

"Good," Barrett said, then embarrassed him thoroughly in front of his brother by hooking his arm around Anthony's waist and yanking him flush against his body so that he could kiss him.

Anthony was helpless against a kiss that demanding, and even with Red standing right there, laughing at them and shaking his head, he succumbed to it, sighing like a young lady with her first beau.

"How much time do we have before supper?" Barrett murmured against Anthony's ear, sliding his hand down to cup the bulge in Anthony's breeches.

"We cannot," Anthony groaned, using every bit of his will to pull away from Barrett.

"Oh, please, do not deny yourselves on my account," Red said, enjoying the whole display a bit too much. "I shall endeavor to sit quietly to the side and observe while you rut like cats in heat."

Anthony pulled away even more and sent his brother a seething look. "You are not helping, Redmond," he said.

"No, you are not," Barrett added, tugging on his jacket as if he knew full well they all had to continue to look presentable, at least, and sporting massive erections would not help that image.

Anthony sighed and resumed his pacing. "We would not be in this muddle if you had done your duty to your sister and assisted her in finding a husband during her season in London," he said as he walked.

"I beg your pardon?" Barrett twisted to face him, more upset by the statement than Anthony figured he would be.

Anthony turned back to face him. "I am merely pointing out that carrying out one's duty to one's family saves a great deal of trouble farther down the road."

“And I believe I have informed you at least three times already that if I had carried out that duty and attended Sophia in London, you and I would never have met,” Barrett insisted.

Anthony winced. Barrett had pointed that out, and Anthony’s life would have suffered immensely if Barrett had never entered it, but a lifetime of adhering strictly to the rules of conduct and respect for duty that he’d been raised with was hard to simply ignore.

“There isn’t much point in arguing,” Red pointed out with a shrug, pushing away from the wall. “Aunt Georgiana and Lady Sophia are already in our midst. Both are determined that Barrett’s sister should end up engaged before she departs our hallowed halls. It seems as though the course of action ahead of us is clear.”

“And that course is?” Anthony asked, one eyebrow arched.

“You cannot be suggesting that Anthony should marry my sister,” Barrett said.

Prickles shot down Anthony’s back. He had a sinking sense that, if his aunt was determined enough, marrying Lady Sophia Landers was a pitfall he might not be able to avoid.

But Red said, “That is not what I am suggesting at all. I am suggesting that Barrett find a husband for his sister who is not the man whose cock he is sucking on a nearly hourly basis.”

Anthony’s face heated. “The navy taught you deplorable manners, I see,” he grumbled.

Barrett merely shrugged. “He’s not wrong,” he said. His eyes flashed with amorous mischief. “On either account.”

Anthony’s mortification softened into affection. Dear God, but he was fond of Barrett. How did he muddle through his life before, without the man in it?

He schooled his face to seriousness in spite of the way his heart danced and asked, “Where do you suggest I find a worthy beau for my lover’s sister when she has her sights set on me?”

Red burst into a broad smile. “Expand what you are already doing,” he said. “Invite a few more gentlemen of your acquaintance to stay for a fortnight or so. You already have a passel of decommissioned naval officers residing under your roof for the summer. Invite additional men who are in want of a wife. There must be at least a dozen in this part of Yorkshire alone.”

Anthony absolutely detested the idea of opening his home to even more intruders, and at a time when, more than anything, he would have liked to send everyone away but him, Barrett, and his children. Before he could say as much, though, there came a tapping at the orangery’s glass door.

All three of them turned to the door just as Lady Sophia let herself in.

“This is where you have all gone off to,” the young woman said with a smile.

She was not unpleasant to look at, but Anthony might have only felt so because she resembled Barrett. She had warm, brown eyes and a clear complexion. Her smile was open and her mouth wide and shapely, like Barrett’s. Unlike Barrett’s, Anthony wanted nothing at all to do with Lady Sophia’s mouth.

“My lady,” Anthony greeted her with a proper bow, stepping closer to her. “I trust you are enjoying your stay at Wodehouse Abbey thus far?”

“I have found the place to be quite lovely, Your Grace,” Lady Sophia said, her eyes dancing with mischief. “Alas, I have seen so little of the grounds as of yet. I came in search of you in the hope that you might walk with me and give me a tour of your beautiful estate.” She glanced past Anthony to fix her brother with a defiant look.

Anthony turned his head to gauge Barrett’s reaction to the request, but what he saw was Red barely able to contain his laughter.

“I think my brother would be more than happy to show you our ancestral lands,” Red said, moving forward as though he would leave the three of them to sort out the muddle on their own. “And I’m certain your brother would relish the chance to accompany you as chaperone.”

Anthony was ready to commit fratricide. “What a splendid idea,” he said with a smile.

Lady Sophia looked temporarily defeated, but she resumed her cheerful and determined air a moment later. “Yes, I think that would be lovely.”

She twisted so that she could prompt Anthony to offer his arm and to escort her out of the orangery. Barrett followed behind them with a look for his sister that conveyed the sort of murderous thoughts Anthony had just had about Redmond.

“The estate was a gift to my great-great-great-grandfather—or perhaps a few more greats than that—in the time of Queen Elizabeth,” Anthony began as they stepped out of the orangery and began a sedate walk down the path that would provide them with the best view of the house and the vista that looked out over the sea. He was highly aware of Barrett walking only a few steps behind them. “It was given its name due to an abbey that had been founded where the house now stands, one that Henry VIII dissolved.”

“I thought the house was Jacobean,” Barrett commented from behind them, earning a sharp look from his sister. Barrett evidently didn’t care that his sister considered him an unnecessary interruption to her obvious plans. “Eliza and Francis told me the many passages and hiding places in the house were to hide supporters of the Young

Pretender.”

Anthony sent him a stern look over his shoulder, uncertain whether Barrett was helping or hurting. “The house was constructed during the Restoration, it’s true,” he said. “At least, the bulk of it. You can still see portions of the original Tudor structure that dated back to the late fifteen-hundreds. The rest of the original manor house was destroyed by fire.”

“How very fascinating, Your Grace,” Lady Sophia said, clinging tightly to Anthony’s arm and swaying closer to him as she walked. “And have there been any threats of fire in more recent years?” she asked, batting her eyelashes.

Anthony felt rather like a natural specimen that had been stabbed through with pins to hold it to its spot. Before he could answer, Barrett grumbled, “There will be a fire in a certain guestroom later, if this sort of behavior continues.”

Lady Sophia sent Barrett a withering look. Anthony wasn’t entirely pleased with Barrett’s interruptions either, but he did understand Barrett’s frustration. He was frustrated too. He was a duke, after all. He should not have to deal with his aunt throwing potential young duchesses at him when he’d made it clear to her that he had no intention of remarrying.

Except, had he made that clear to her? Had he ever truly made his own thoughts on such intimate subjects clear to anyone? There was a fair chance he hadn’t and that Aunt Georgiana believed she was doing her duty to him just as he believed Barrett should have done his duty to his sister from the start.

He chose to manage the situation by ignoring all of the undercurrents. “The ancestor in question who was granted the title Duke of Malton and this estate was one Percival Wodehouse,” he recited on as he had for many a visitor before Lady Sophia. “He financed several ships in Queen Elizabeth’s legendary armada and steadfastly upheld her sovereignty against the accusations and threats of her cousin, Mary Queen of Scots. As Yorkshire was in a far more delicate position between the warring kingdoms in those days, Percival’s influence and actions were much needed.”

He managed to control the balance between Lady Sophia’s blatant affections and Barrett’s jealousies by turning into a dry old tome of history as they rambled about the estate. There was a great deal of comfort in shutting aside every emotional part of him, walking with a straight back and sedate steps, and reciting facts that had been drilled into him since he was a boy. It was a thousand times easier to think of himself simply as Malton and not the man who had discovered worlds of pleasure and affection that he’d never known in the arms of another man as they traversed a loop that took them around the estate. As

satisfying as it was to give in to the streak of carnality that had surprised him and let that once-hidden part of himself have free rein, it was an equal relief to pretend that part of him didn't exist for a moment so that he could execute his duties as Lady Sophia's host.

"I had no idea such a fascinating estate existed all the way up here on the coast of Yorkshire," Lady Sophia told him with a particularly fetching smile as they made their way back to the garden where, Anthony was distressed to see, his aunt was in the process of ordering his servants to set up tea. "But I suppose Yorkshire is full of many hidden charms." Lady Sophia rested her free hand on Anthony's arm and made doe-eyes at him.

Behind them, Barrett clumsily swallowed a chuckle.

Lady Sophia twisted to give him a seething look. "Do you have something to add, dear brother?" she asked.

"No, darling," Barrett said, mirth sparkling in his eyes and making Anthony's heart hitch in his chest. "I agree with you completely. Yorkshire is full of hidden charms." He met Anthony's eyes with a look that would certainly lead to the two of them being exposed.

Anthony could see they were heading for trouble and did his best to stave it off. "Yorkshire is my home, my lady," he told Lady Sophia with as polite a smile as he could manage. "I would rather spend my time here than in London, and were it not for my duties in Parliament, I would never leave."

"Oh?" Lady Sophia's smile faltered a bit, which was precisely what Anthony had hoped for. Young ladies of Lady Sophia's vigor generally preferred London society to the country, and if she felt she would be denied that by setting her heart on him, perhaps she would change her mind. But to Anthony's distress, she sighed happily, glanced up at the afternoon sun, and said, "I believe that if Wodehouse Abbey were my house, I would never want to leave as well."

A strangled sound came from Barrett, and when Anthony risked a glance at him, he had his hand to his mouth as though trying to hide his laughter. "And how do you feel about it?" Anthony asked him, perhaps a little too pointedly.

Barrett seemed to guess what Anthony was asking after and replied with a rakish grin, "I believe that anyplace could feel like home, provided one was in the right company." And since his sister was facing in the other direction, he finished his statement with a wink.

Anthony's face heated as his pulse sped up. Endearing sentiments such as that were not what he needed when he was attempting to put Lady Sophia off while still being a good host.

"Oh, look," Lady Sophia said, inclining her head toward Aunt Georgiana and the servants setting up for tea. "It appears your aunt has arranged for refreshments for us. Come along and tell me how you

take your tea. I foresee that to be information that will come in quite handy.”

Lady Sophia tugged at Anthony’s arm while sending Barrett a look as if to tell him to find something else to do so she could have Anthony all to himself.

Blast him, but Barrett humored her with, “I will leave the two of you to your tea, then.”

Lady Sophia looked beyond delighted. “Are you certain you will not join us?” she asked with a flash in her eyes that said exactly the opposite.

Barrett was having entirely too much fun at Anthony’s expense. “I think not,” he said, darting a quick grin to Anthony. “I’ve neglected to visit Lord Francis and Lady Eliza far too much this week, and I believe I am due for an unexpected visit to the nursery.”

Anthony wished he could go with Barrett. Engaging in lascivious behavior at every moment of the day and in every location imaginable was ridiculously enjoyable, but Anthony missed those few times when he and Barrett had taken the children for a ride or into Hull for a day.

“You go on ahead, my lady,” he told Lady Sophia, letting go of her arm. “I just need a word with your brother.”

“Oh,” Lady Sophia said, her eyes glittering as though Anthony wanted to speak to Barrett so that he could ask for her hand in marriage. “Yes, please do speak with Barrett about any topic that pleases you.”

She stepped away, deliberately standing in a pretty pose for a moment, the sunshine highlighting her fine complexion, then swept off toward the garden.

As soon as Anthony was certain she was out of earshot, he turned to Barrett and said, “Your sister is perfectly charming, but if I have to spend another minute feeling as though I am a prize to be won at a country faire, I am not certain I will be able to maintain my sanity.”

Barrett laughed. “When Sophia sets her mind to something, she does not give up easily.”

“I can see that,” Anthony said, pivoting to glance at her.

As it happened, Lady Sophia had twisted to glance back as well, and when she saw Anthony and Barrett watching her, she burst into a smile.

Anthony turned back to Barrett and sighed. “I do not like the direction this has turned in.”

“Nothing will come of it,” Barrett said with a shrug. “Although I do think you should consider Red’s idea to invite more men to stay for a while who might actually want to marry my sister.”

Anthony’s brow shot up. “You would have me invite more guests to distract from our tryst?” He risked raising a hand to pluck at one of

the buttons on Barrett's jacket.

Barrett growled, and if they didn't have a small audience in the form of his sister and Anthony's aunt, Anthony was certain they would have run off to the nearest secluded spot where they could bugger each other senseless.

"I believe additional, marriage-minded guests are the only way to satisfy my sister without causing disaster for you," Barrett admitted at last.

"I suppose it must be done," Anthony agreed with a wince. "At least it will keep my aunt happy. And there are one or two distant neighbors I have not seen for some time who are not odious. They might suit for Lady Sophia, and I would not be averse to entertaining them. For an extremely limited amount of time," he added at the end.

"A house party within the house party it is, then," Barrett said, and if they weren't being watched, Anthony was certain he would have kissed him, and he would have reveled in it.

By supper that night, Barrett still couldn't decide if he wanted to wring his sister's neck or sit back and watch her attempting to turn Anthony's head for the ridiculous entertainment it provided.

"It would be so lovely if you could join the ladies after supper," Sophia said, rushing to catch Anthony's arm as they all made their way from the dining room to the hall. "But if the gentlemen insist on retiring to their brandy, I do not suppose there is anything a delicate woman such as myself could do about it." She leaned closer to Anthony, batting her eyelashes and providing him with an exquisite view of her bodice, which was cut entirely too low. If his sister had been in the company of anyone other than a group of men who were utterly uninterested in such things, Barrett would have grabbed the nearest serviette to tie around her neck.

"Papa likes to pass time with Barrett and his friends after supper," Eliza spoke up from Anthony's other side, as if she were his chief defender. She narrowed her eyes at Sophia and went on with, "And then he comes up to the nursery to tuck me and Francis into bed."

Barrett had to cover his mouth with his hand as he and Red walked a few steps behind the warring trio. Sophia looked as though someone had struck her with a damp rag and she didn't quite know what to do about it.

"Yes, well, perhaps in time there will be others whom your father wishes to tuck into bed as well," Sophia said with a snap in her voice.

Barrett nearly missed a step. Red choked his way into something that started as a laugh and ended as a fit of coughing. Even Septimus and Seymour, who walked at the back of the group and had been more interested in their own conversation, started.

Lady Grosmont, who hovered off to Sophia's side, keeping pace with her and Anthony and Eliza, seemed taken aback. "Lady Sophia," she hissed in censure, but went no further than that.

"Have I said something wrong?" Sophia said with entirely feigned innocence. She peeked over her shoulder at Barrett before her eyes dropped to Francis, who walked by Barrett's side, then said, "I was referring to future children, of course. Surely His Grace is not averse to the idea of begetting more." She turned a fetching smile on

Anthony.

Anthony, in his infinite wisdom and grace, turned to Eliza, brimming with affection, and said, "A man does not need more when he already has perfection." He let go of Sophia's arm and twisted to hold out a hand to Francis.

Eliza turned a charming shade of pink and stopped their entire procession so she could hug her father. "I love you so, Papa," she declared with a sigh.

"I love you too." Francis rushed forward to embrace Anthony as well.

Barrett's heart swelled to near bursting, but Lady Grosmont made a scandalized sound.

"This is ridiculously unseemly," she grumbled. "Children belong in the nursery, not at the supper table. And such outpourings of affection for one's offspring are indecorous at best. Anthony, you should send these two on their way and deport yourself in a manner more fitting of your station at once."

Barrett's brow flew up as Anthony stiffened and stared at his aunt. Barrett hadn't thought it was possible, but Lady Grosmont appeared to be out-dutying the master of duty.

"I think it is lovely," Sophia said with practiced softness in her expression as she gazed at Anthony and his children. "Paternal love is a quality that highly recommends a man. It is unfortunate that my and Barrett's father wasn't half as affectionate or attentive. Lord Francis, Lady Eliza, you are lucky children indeed."

Barrett's mouth twitched with mirth, and if they'd been alone, he would have applauded Sophia for her gambit. She'd obviously recognized Anthony's adoration of his children and was attempting to use it in her favor.

Lady Grosmont sighed and shook her head. "I suppose," she said, committing to nothing. A moment later, she brightened. "Perhaps Lady Sophia could assist you in putting the children to bed."

Sophia's expression brightened. "Yes, I would like that." She smiled her winning smile at Anthony.

Anthony flushed and flustered before Eliza came to his rescue. "I believe I shall put myself to bed tonight," she said with her chin tilted up and defiance in her eyes. "Come along, Francis." She held out her hand to her brother.

"Well, if you insist," Sophia said. Her expression flattened to a frown as she watched the children march off and up the stairs, and Barrett could only imagine she'd just realized what sort of an obstacle Eliza was to her machinations.

Not that there weren't a great many other, insurmountable obstacles besides Eliza's jealousy.

"I think I may retire for the evening as well," Barrett said, sending a subtle look in Anthony's direction, "seeing as there is no one to put me to bed either." He trusted that Anthony would recognize the spark in his eyes that said there most certainly was someone to do the job.

Anthony did a brilliant job of keeping his expression utterly neutral, but the flash in his eyes indicated he was game for anything Barrett had in mind. "I believe it would be wise for us all to make an early night of it," he said. He turned to Sophia and Lady Grosmont and said, "You must still be weary from your travels."

"How kind and considerate you are, Your Grace," Sophia said, touching Anthony's arm and smiling flatteringly at him.

She moved off, and a moment later the rest of them headed for the stairs as well, with the exception of Lady Grosmont.

"I wish to discuss the personages you will invite to this impromptu house party you intend to throw, Your Grace," she said, stopping Anthony with her voice alone.

Barrett couldn't suppress a grin over the fact that the woman called her own nephew by his formal title.

"House party?" Anthony's voice wavered. "I had thought to invite a few more gentlemen only."

"Certainly not," Lady Grosmont said with a huff. "You will host a formal house party, and I will organize it. As such, I have much to discuss with you."

"Can it wait until morning?" Anthony appealed to her.

"When you wish to host this party in a mere five days' time?" Lady Grosmont barked.

Anthony let out a breath and glanced to Barrett, clearly appealing for help. But there was little Barrett could do, other than pretend he wasn't ready to strip Anthony down to his skin and do whatever was necessary to ease the tension from his lover's body, as he walked past.

"I suppose," Anthony said, dropping his shoulders. His expression turned apologetic for Barrett for a half second before he beckoned to his aunt to accompany him into the closest parlor.

Barrett chuckled to himself and headed up the stairs, catching up to Red.

"I see my esteemed aunt has interrupted my brother's true intentions for retiring early," Red joked.

Barrett laughed humorlessly and jabbed Red with his elbow. "We are not thwarted yet," he said.

Once he reached his room, Barrett took his time undressing and bathing for the night. Anthony had mentioned that he enjoyed the scent Barrett wore, which was really nothing more than the blend he'd discovered for minimizing personal odor, so he dabbed some of that on as well. He counted the minutes, calculating how long it would

take for Lady Grosmont to bully Anthony into inviting the houseguests she wanted, and when he was certain enough time had passed, he donned his banyan and crept out of his room.

Before he even reached the end of his hall, he knew his careful planning was all for naught.

"And you must invite Lady Sylvia Kettering as well," Lady Grosmont was in the middle of badgering Anthony at the top of the staircase separating the guest rooms and the family rooms. "She is close friends with Lady Wellsford."

"Yes, Aunt Georgiana," Anthony said, his voice flat and impatient.

"I suppose that means you'll have to increase the number of gentlemen you invite, now as well," Lady Grosmont went on. "We cannot have a greater number of ladies than gentlemen. Do you not agree, Lord Copeland?"

Barrett flinched as Lady Grosmont spoke his name. He hadn't realized the old harridan had seen him. There was nothing for it but to step forward and say, "Yes, my lady, I do agree."

Even though she'd just addressed him, Lady Grosmont gaped at him as though he'd grown an extra head. "Good Lord, young man. Why are you wandering the halls of my ancestral home in such a state of dishabille?"

Barrett's mouth dropped open uselessly. He glanced to Anthony, but the blasted man grinned back at him. He wasn't going to be a bit of help. When Lady Grosmont turned to him as if for an explanation, Anthony's expression snapped back to stony gravity.

"I was on my way to the library to select another book, as I have just finished the one I was reading," Barrett blurted. As far as quick excuses went, it wasn't bad.

"The library is downstairs, not up." Lady Grosmont narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"Er, His Grace had mentioned a tome he recently finished that piqued my interest, and I came in search of him to ask the title," Barrett fumbled.

Lady Grosmont turned to Anthony. "Well? What was the title?"

Anthony's mouth opened, but it took him a few seconds before he came up with, "*Heaven and Hell*."

Barrett's mouth twitched. It was indeed. "Thank you, Your Grace." He grinned at Anthony.

"You have your title, my lord. Be on your way." Lady Grosmont dismissed Barrett.

As soon as her back was turned, Barrett pressed his lips together to hold in a laugh and backtracked to the stairs. He could only imagine how Anthony must have had his hands full over the years, what with Lady Grosmont's forcefulness.

Barrett made his way to the library, since that was where he'd been banished, but only to wait for as long as he calculated it might be before Lady Grosmont grew tired of haranguing Anthony and went to bed. On the off chance that the woman would catch him once again, he selected a book without reading the title, then started back the way he'd come. It was a good thing he'd taken a book, because for all his waiting, Lady Grosmont was still lecturing an extremely impatient Anthony at the top of the stairs.

"And you must provide plenty of entertainment for your guests as well," Lady Grosmont was saying. "At least two dances, even though you only plan to have your guests for a fortnight."

"Yes, Aunt Georgiana," Anthony said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I am aware of the proper way to host a house party."

"I am not so certain of that," Lady Grosmont went on. "A man who has remained unmarried, even after being widowed, is usually the very last person who would—I beg your pardon, Lord Copeland, is there something I can do for you?" Lady Grosmont interrupted her lecture to stare hard at Barrett.

It took everything Barrett had not to burst into laughter at Anthony's expense. "No, my lady," he said, then held up his book. "I am merely returning from my errand."

Lady Grosmont sniffed. "Your guestroom is on the floor below this, is it not?"

Barrett could have strangled the woman. "I, er, didn't realize which floor I was on, my lady."

He headed back down the stairs as Lady Grosmont sighed and turned back to Anthony. He stayed only a few steps down, right around a corner so that he could monitor the conversation, though. "Now, when it comes to the matter of proper food to serve at a house party—"

"Aunt Georgiana," Anthony cut her off in an exhausted voice. "While I do appreciate your counsel on this matter, please, go to bed."

"I beg your pardon?" Lady Grosmont sounded affronted.

"That is to say," Anthony backtracked, all politeness, "I am quite worn out from the day and wish to go to bed myself. We can discuss all of these things in the morning."

"Very well," Lady Grosmont sighed. "But I expect the matter to be settled and the invitations to be sent out before luncheon tomorrow."

"Of course," Anthony said. "Good night."

"Good night, dear." Lady Grosmont must have kissed Anthony's cheek or shown some other sign of affection before turning to head off to her guestroom, wherever that was.

Barrett prepared to wait a few moments to be certain the woman was gone, but she surprised him by appearing at the top of the stairs,

leaning over the banister to get a better look at him, before he was ready.

“Lord Copeland,” Lady Grosmont said with a scowl. “Why are you lurking in the halls like a specter?”

“I, er, I needed to ask His Grace one further question,” Barrett fumbled.

Lady Grosmont scowled at him. “My nephew has gone to bed and does not wish to be disturbed. Go to your room.”

Barrett nearly choked on his tongue at the admonishment. The august lady reminded him a bit too much of his nanny with those words. “Yes, ma’am,” he said, clutching his book closer to his chest and slinking down the rest of the stairs.

Lady Grosmont clucked and shook her head before continuing down the hall that would take her into another wing. Barrett pretended to retreat until he was well and truly certain the woman would not block his way yet again, then he turned and dashed back up the stairs so quickly that anyone who would have seen him would have thought he was mad.

When he reached the hallway with Anthony’s room, Anthony was hiding right around the corner. Without a word, he grasped Barrett’s hand, and the two of them rushed on to Anthony’s bedchamber, trying not to giggle like disobedient schoolboys.

“Your aunt is a bit of a menace,” Barrett laughed once they were safely within Anthony’s room.

Only, as soon as they dashed inside, shut the door, and leaned their backs against it, panting, they noticed Winters was already in the room, laying out Anthony’s clothes for the next day. All three men were startled into jumping and exclaiming wordlessly, and Barrett dropped his book.

“Good evening, Your Grace, my lord,” Winters said, turning a particularly violent shade of pink. “I was just finishing up here,” he stammered on. “Do you need my assistance undressing?”

“No, Winters, I can manage on my own,” Barrett replied in Anthony’s stead, sending Winters a cheeky wink as he did.

Winters squeaked, and bolted for the door. “I am truly sorry, Your Grace, my lord. I will not interfere in the morning.”

“Thank you, Winters,” Anthony said, looking as mortified as Winters did.

“Winters,” Barrett called after the man as he reached for the doorhandle. “Would you mind keeping Lady Grosmont from... interfering?”

“Of course, my lord,” Winters replied, looking as alarmed as could be. “I will guard your secret with my life.”

As soon as Winters exited the room with the stalwart

determination of a faithful squire in a medieval morality play, Barrett burst into laughter. Anthony laughed as well, but his laughter was shorter-lived.

"My aunt is going to make things difficult," he groaned, stepping away from the door.

"Send her away," Barrett said with a shrug, walking after him and intercepting him so that he could undo the buttons of Anthony's jacket. "Tell her to pack up her meddlesome ways and return to whatever cave she lives in."

Anthony sent Barrett a censorious look, but allowed Barrett to continue undressing him. "I cannot do that."

"Why not?" Barrett shrugged, pushing Anthony's jacket from his shoulders, tossing it aside, and starting in on his waistcoat. "She arrived uninvited, she is attempting to force you into a marriage you do not want—and believe me, I know my sister, she is a delightful woman, but you do not wish to be married to her—and she has upended your peaceful existence. Send her away."

"She is my father's sister," Anthony argued, tugging at his neckcloth, his body growing stiffer by the moment instead of relaxing. "This was once her house. Whether she arrived uninvited or not, and in spite of her bullying behavior, I have a duty to her as my elder."

"Duty," Barrett spat the word as though it were a sour apple he'd bitten into.

"Yes, I know, you detest the very concept," Anthony snapped.

Barrett's eyes went wide at the venom in his lover's voice, and he took a step back. "There is no need to sound like that about it."

"Isn't there?" Anthony stepped aside to shrug out of his waistcoat and toss his neckcloth aside.

Barrett spread his arms wide. "You are a duke. You can invite whomever you'd like into your home and you can throw them out as you see fit, whether you have some sort of phantom duty to them or not."

"Duty is not a phantom," Anthony argued. "And no, I cannot offend the woman who has cared for me and my children since the death of my parents and my wife as though she is a maid who was caught stealing the silver. My aunt is a lady in her own right, and as such, she deserves toleration at the very least. She deserves respect."

"And how far does that respect carry?" Barrett demanded, walking over as Anthony sat to remove his boots and kneeling so that he could help pull them off. "Far enough that you are willing to let her stock your house with insipid ladies and boorish gentlemen who you do not know and do not wish to know?"

"The house party was Red's idea, not hers." Anthony raised his voice louder than he ever had while arguing with Barrett.

"Red's idea was to invite a few additional gentlemen," Barrett argued. "How many guests will your aunt invite?"

"She listed twenty at least," Anthony mumbled.

"Twenty!" Barrett exclaimed. "Oh, Anthony."

"You agreed to the scheme. If you would like to submit a list of people you think I should invite, go right ahead. In fact, please do. Perhaps then you could be said to be living up to your own responsibilities to your sister."

Barrett pulled Anthony's second boot off, threw it aside, then stood. "Not this again," he growled. "You love duty so much that you are determined to toss it at me whenever you have the chance."

Anthony stood and stepped toe to toe with Barrett. "Only a man of dubious maturity cares nothing for the wellbeing of his family and the responsibilities that have been entrusted to him."

"Are you calling me immature, then?" Barrett's heart thundered against his ribs and his muscles bunched with tension that wasn't entirely anger.

"I am calling you a wastrel, my lord," Anthony fired at him, back straight, raising himself to his full height. "I am calling you a man with no concerns other than his own freedom and enjoyment."

Barrett's eyes flared wide. He should be hurt by Anthony's words. They should have cut him to the quick. But there was something fiery and seductive behind them. "You dare accuse me of caring for nothing but my own pleasure? Of wanting to be free when I have risked life and limb to come to you tonight?" Life and limb might have been laying it on a bit thick, but Lady Grosmont was far more formidable than half of the American privateers the *Majesty* had chased down in its day.

"I am calling you a scoundrel," Anthony growled, his face flushing. "An irresponsible, selfish, duty-shirking—"

Barrett didn't let him get any further than that. He clamped a hand around the back of Anthony's head and brought their mouths crashing together in a brutal kiss that silenced their argument. It was hot and savage, and within moments, they were tearing at the remaining items of clothing each wore.

"I am vexed with you," Anthony panted between searing kisses and aggressive gropes as they moved toward the bed. "It does not follow that I also want you so desperately I feel as though my body will ignite."

"Yes, it does," Barrett told him, his own anger quickly giving way to frantic lust. "Anger sex is—"

He got no further than that before they reached the bed and Anthony pushed him onto his back. That was far from the end of things. Within moments of Anthony perching atop him, Barrett used

his superior strength to wrestle the man to his back. Their tussle continued in waves of kissing, groping, muscling, flipping, and groaning until they were both sweating and hard with arousal. Their original anger transformed into something far more searing, and by the time Barrett finally won the upper hand, made use of the ointment that was a now constant presence on Anthony's bedside, and plunged repeatedly into Anthony from behind while holding his arms behind his back and his head against the pillow, they were both too wild with passion to remember what they'd been arguing about.

"I should not love this so much," Anthony moaned as Barrett thrust over and over at a punishing pace. "I should not love you so much."

Barrett was too overcome with need to do more than groan at the twin pleasures of physical sensation and the backwards way Anthony might just have confessed his love. He kept up his thrusts but leaned forward, letting Anthony's arms go so that he could reach around to stroke his prick, bringing them both to deep, intense orgasms within a minute. It was all far more satisfying than any fight had a right to end.

Afterwards, as they lay together on the bed, gasping to catch their breath, Barrett reached for Anthony's hand, twining their fingers together. "I am not averse to duty," he confessed, leaning his head toward Anthony's shoulder and feeling as though his heart were too big for his chest. "It is just that I have yet to find a duty that feels like my own."

Anthony turned his head to gaze into Barrett's eyes, then turned onto his side and tucked his body against Barrett's, even though they were both still too hot and sweaty for it to be entirely comfortable. "I hope you find that duty someday, love," he murmured, then closed his eyes and rested his head against Barrett's.

With a burst of unfathomable affection, Barrett felt in his soul as though he just had.

Five days later, the floodgates opened and Wodehouse Abbey was inundated with ladies and gentlemen that Barrett had no wish to know and even less desire to waste his time with. He knew it was entirely unfair of him, that there was nothing inherently wrong with the sprightly pair that Lady Sylvia Kettering and Lady Constance Wellsford made, that Lord Overton was a perfectly agreeable young man, and that Lord Spalding was an engaging conversationalist. It was just that with Anthony as such a fresh, new force in his life that he didn't want to share. Especially after the unintentional confession his lover might have made in the throes of passion after their argument. Hosting an entire house party felt like an underhanded trick on Lady Grosmont's part. The only people Barrett wanted to spend any time at all with were Anthony and his children. Even Red, Septimus, and Seymour felt secondary to him, but they'd been ambushed by what felt like a small, fashionable army.

"You are very kind to host such a charming party on such short notice, Your Grace," Lady Constance told Anthony with a smile as all of the newly arrived guests gathered for tea in the conservatory.

"I was more than willing to set everything aside to attend," Lady Sylvia cooed on Anthony's other side. Both women looked like dogs who had spotted a meaty bone.

"You both do me a great honor with your presence," Anthony nodded to each of them in turn. His back was rod straight, his expression was a mask of banal amiability, and once again, his finely-tailored clothes didn't seem to fit. Barrett watched him like a hawk from several yards away, bristling with resentment over the way his summer idyll had been ruined—for Anthony's sake as much as for his own.

Barrett hated the house party that had sprung up like mushrooms after a hard rain with every fiber of his being. Instead of one lady throwing herself at his lover, he now had half a dozen angling for the position of duchess. Worse still, as it was a dreary day, the entire party was confined to the indoors. Barrett found himself continually glancing to the curtains behind which he and Anthony had nearly had their first kiss.

He wasn't the only one out of sorts about the whole thing. At his side, Sophia made a disgusted noise. "Who was the blackguard who conceived of the idea of filling this house to the brim with flatterers and fortune-hunters?" She glanced suspiciously up at Barrett. "It was you, was it not?"

"It absolutely was not," Barrett grumbled in a tone that was twin to that of his sister. "It was Lady Grosmont's idea."

Sophia made an affronted sound. "The traitor," she sniffed. "Why, Lady Grosmont practically guaranteed me the title of duchess before the summer's end, and now she's complicated the battlefield with other duchess aspirants?"

Barrett sent his sister a sideways look of fondness. He reached for her hand and tucked it in the crook of his elbow. "Now, now, Soph, what were you just saying about fortune-hunters?" he teased her. "Do not be short-sighted," he went on fondly when Sophia humphed. "Perhaps Lady Grosmont has become as aware, as I have said from the start, that Malton has no wish to remarry, and as such, she has set the table with other morsels to tempt you into marriage." Which was precisely what Red had suggested in the first place and he'd agreed to, but if Lady Grosmont ended up taking credit for it, it was of no consequence to Barrett. A married sister was a happy sister, no matter how the marriage was accomplished.

Sophia seemed to see right through the layers of his ploy, though. "Pray tell, brother, are there any other dukes in this new assembly?" she asked, one eyebrow arched.

"How am I supposed to know, Soph?" Barrett descended into informality, even though they were in company. It was just the two of them standing side by side, whispering their conversation. Septimus had bolted on the excuse that he and Seymour needed to work on their school from the moment the first guest arrived, and Red—who had tried to escape as well but had been caught by his aunt—was currently engaged with a certain Miss Frobshire and her chattering chaperone at the other end of the room. "I am a guest here myself," he went on.

Though, if he were honest, he didn't feel like a guest at all. In just a short time, Wodehouse Abbey had come to feel more like a home to him than any of the grand country estates or London townhouses he'd ever occupied. The *Majesty* had felt like his home for the last few years, but even that was temporary. Wodehouse Abbey had a sort of magic in its walls that made him feel as though he belonged there. Or perhaps the magic was in those words Anthony had moaned with pleasure the other night. *I should not love you so much.*

Anthony chose just that moment to glance away from his conversation with Lady Sylvia and Lady Constance to meet Barrett's

gaze. It was as if the man had shot Cupid's arrows from his warm, hazel eyes and pierced Barrett's heart. Which was a ridiculous notion, all things considered. Barrett's heart wasn't the organ that was enthralled with Anthony. Theirs was a summer dalliance that would wear itself out eventually.

In his soul, he knew that was little more than a convenient lie.

"Barrett, look," Sophia whispered at his side, tugging on his sleeve and causing a burst of annoyance to spread through his chest when her gesturing made Anthony look away. "The duke was looking at me. He was beckoning me to come rescue him, I am certain."

"I saw no such thing," Barrett told her with a pretend teasing smile. In fact, his own sentiment had him feeling as though he were the one Anthony were beckoning to for a rescue.

"He needs me," Sophia continued to hiss. "You must escort me over to him at once. For I know now why Lady Grosmont invited all these other ladies." She sent a furtive look around the room.

"You do?" Barrett raised one eyebrow and looked as well. There didn't seem to be anything special about the ladies. He did catch Lord Overton's eye by accident, though, and the eager man shot forward as if he'd been summoned from the corner where he'd been standing by himself, looking forlorn.

"She has invited them so that I might rise to the challenge and appear to be the best choice out of many," Sophia said, "instead of the only choice available."

Barrett blinked at her, his mouth tugging into a wry grin. "Are you suggesting that your benefactress deliberately created competition for you so that you could make a show of trouncing them?"

"Yes, that has to be it," Sophia said.

Barrett would have laughed at his sister's leaps of mental logic—and the fact that she had spunk—but Lord Overton approached them before he could indulge.

"What an extraordinary house we've all been invited to, do you not think, Lord Copeland, Lady Sophia?" the young man asked with a bright smile directed at Sophia.

Barrett sketched the man's character in an instant—he was cheery, he was amiable, he possessed middling intelligence, and he was immediately taken with Sophia. Thank God.

"It has quite a history," Barrett said, assuming a less formal mien with the man than he usually would, since the fellow could very well have been the answer to his prayers. "Sophia likely remembers more of it than I do." He let go of his sister's arm as if to signal Overton should take it up, proverbially if not literally.

Sophia kept her smile polite and her manner cool, damn her. "Yes, His Grace gave me a tour of the estate personally upon my arrival. He

is such a kind and knowledgeable man, and so affable, for a duke.”

Barrett wanted to squeeze his eyes shut or slap his sister’s hand. She could not have been more obvious in her intentions if she’d tried. Poor Overton felt the blow immediately, as evidenced by the slight dip in his countenance. Fortunately, he did not seem to be the sort to give up easily.

“Yes, I have been very impressed with Malton my whole life,” he said, his smile returning. “I am merely a viscount myself, though my father is a marquess, but I have known the Wodehouse family since I was a boy. My estate of Houghton is only a few miles from here. The previous Duchess of Malton and my mother were friends and visited each other from time to time. Malton has always been a good and impressive man.”

“I am glad we agree on that,” Sophia said, her smile for Overton becoming genuine. “I might assume, of course, that you could tell quite a few stories of His Grace as a boy, could you not?”

“A few,” Overton said with a modest smile. “There was one time when the entire Wodehouse family joined our family on a boating holiday.”

As much as Barrett would have loved to listen to the tale of Anthony as a boy, his attention was drawn to the man himself as Lady Sylvia burst into laughter and touched Anthony’s arm. A pang of jealousy rose up and took Barrett by surprise. Not because Lady Sylvia—or any woman in England or the world—had a chance of stealing Anthony’s affections from him, but because the Anthony that he had enjoyed so thoroughly for the past fortnight was completely gone. In his place was the stiff and unyielding Duke of Malton.

The transformation was startling. Barrett had grown so used to seeing an Anthony who was full of life and passion. He’d come to know Anthony as a tender-hearted man who loved his children and would move heaven and earth for them. He knew Anthony as a man who laughed frequently and who moaned and sighed with abandon when he made love. The man standing almost at attention several yards away, smiling vacantly and agreeing placidly with whatever nonsense the ladies were probably saying to him was a shell of the man Barrett loved.

As soon as the thought struck him, he caught his breath. Loved?

“Barrett. Barrett? Brother, are you quite well?” Sophia asked, tugging on his sleeve. Barrett hadn’t been aware of his sister touching him again. His thoughts and his heart had been elsewhere entirely.

“I am quite well,” he lied.

Sophia narrowed her eyes at him. “You suddenly looked as though you might be ill,” she said, glancing in the direction Barrett had been looking. Which, of course, meant she stared straight at Anthony. “Is

something the matter with Malton?" she asked, suddenly anxious.

"No, I believe all is well with him." Barrett didn't like the suspicion in his sister's eyes.

"Should we take our conversation to him?" Sophia asked on, peeking briefly at Overton, though whether to dismiss him or to assess whether he should accompany them, Barrett couldn't tell.

He was saved from the embarrassment of having to explain why his mind had wandered and what the blush that he could now feel painting his cheeks with heat was about as Lady Grosmont exclaimed, "Good heavens! What on earth are *you* doing here, sir?" to a man who had just strode into the room and taken up a pose like a peacock.

Peacock was something of a literal description as well. The man wore a peacock blue jacket cut in a style that would make Beau Brummel proud. Underneath was a green waistcoat that complimented the peacock theme. His dark blue breeches were cut almost obscenely tightly, which somehow matched the gratified grin that the man wore, as if he knew everyone in the room was watching him and why. And they were, partially because he was, even Barrett had to admit, devilishly handsome, with patrician features and light brown hair that curled fashionably, and partially because of the suddenness of his arrival.

Anthony also stared blatantly at the man—which provoked a sudden, real twist of jealousy in Barrett's gut. He broke away from the ladies accosting him to step closer to the newcomer and greeted him with, "Lord Siggleshorpe. You weren't invited."

Barrett blinked at the oddly blunt greeting and the fact that Anthony issued it with a genuine smile. That only made Barrett's jealousy burn hotter, and without taking his leave of his sister or Overton, he stepped away and made his way across the room to investigate who the colorful newcomer was.

"There was a party to be had," the peacock, Lord Siggleshorpe, said with an affected shrug. "I assumed my invitation was waylaid in the post."

"I am certain it was," Anthony said, bowing to the man in a cordial manner.

"Percy!" Red called out as he, too, broke away from the conversation he'd been trapped in to sail across the room. "I'd no idea Anthony invited you. I shall have to change my mind about bugging off now." Instead of bowing, he grasped Siggleshorpe's hand and shook it enthusiastically.

"Oh, please do not change your bugging plans on my behalf," Siggleshorpe said in a decidedly cheeky and most definitely queer manner. Barrett had no doubt at all about the man. In fact, he didn't know how he'd missed the fact that Siggleshorpe wore powder and

rouge—though not in as pronounced an amount as was popular a few decades before—from across the room.

“Percy, allow me to introduce my friend and shipmate from the *Majesty*,” Red began, thumping a hand on Barrett’s back. “Lord Barrett Landers, Viscount Copeland.”

“A pleasure, my lord,” Siggleshorpe growled, greeting Barrett with a perfect bow and a perfectly wicked wink.

“You’re too late,” Red laughed, sending Siggleshorpe a teasing look, but failing—thankfully—to elaborate, as they were in public and all eyes were on them.

All Siggleshorpe could say as he eyed Barrett up and down was, “More’s the pity.”

For half a second, Barrett thought he saw the same sort of jealousy he’d just been feeling spark in Anthony’s eyes, but it was gone in a flash and the stoic duke was back as Lady Grosmont rushed to join their group.

“Lord Siggleshorpe, what are you doing here?” she hissed, glancing around at their observers as if ordering them all to return to their conversations. Surprisingly, most of them did.

Instead of appearing remotely cowed, Siggleshorpe’s face lit with delight and he bowed perfectly. “Lady Grosmont, you grow more beauteous and more distinguished with every passing year. Wrong are the tyrants who declare that the flower of beauty is reserved for spring. You are as magnificent as the hellebore that blooms at yuletide and makes the season magical.”

Barrett nearly choked on his tongue in his effort not to laugh.

Lady Grosmont let out a soft, “Oh,” her wrinkled face turning pink with pleasure. “Lord Siggleshorpe, you are too kind. I do not know how your invitation to this gathering was overlooked. Please accept my apologies on behalf my nephew.”

Barrett peeked to Anthony, and when Anthony sent him a look as if to ask whether he was ready for a show, Barrett had to clap a hand discreetly over his mouth. Not only because of the amusement that Siggleshorpe was sure to be, but because for one glorious moment, the true Anthony had shone through the façade of Malton that had built up around him.

“There is no need to apologize, my lady,” Siggleshorpe bowed to Lady Grosmont again. “All is easily forgiven between friends. Please do not let me keep you from your far more deserving guests.”

“Thank you, my lord.” Lady Grosmont smiled. “It has just occurred to me that I will need to rearrange the seating for supper. I believe Lady Wilmington would enjoy your company very much.” She grinned at Siggleshorpe, glanced quickly around the room as if reassessing the playing field, then hurried off.

As soon as she was gone, Siggleshorpe inched closer to Red and leaned in to murmur, "Now, tell me, my friend. I've heard a rumor that this house is positively filled to the brim with sailors this summer. Please do point them out as I intend to *befriend* the lot of them."

Barrett had to bite his knuckle to keep from bursting with laughter. And he believed that he conducted himself in a free and open manner.

"We are still awaiting the complement from the *Hawk*," Red informed Siggleshorpe. "I've just had a letter from my friend, Lucas, saying they've been held up in Portsmouth, but they should be arriving within a fortnight."

Barrett didn't hear the rest of the explanation. To his surprise, instead of remaining there to converse with the wildly diverting new houseguest, Anthony bowed, resumed his mantle of ducal respectability, and attempted to return to the cluster of ladies who watched their group from the side of the room. Barrett stepped into his path as subtly as he could to stop him.

"Are you not going to finish conversing with this delightful new entry into the pantheon of mad houseguests you are hosting?" he asked with a teasing smile.

Instead of joking along with him, Anthony's expression returned to its bland look of politeness. "I believe my aunt would rather I continue setting the young ladies she has invited at ease. Lady Sylvia and Lady Constance were feeling a bit anxious about traveling so far from home on such short notice."

Barrett's cheery mood flattened. "They look perfectly well to me," he said. "And Lord Siggleshorpe seems to be much better company. How long have you known the man?"

Anthony pressed his lips together as though Barrett was keeping him from something he would rather be doing. He glanced to Lady Sylvia and Lady Constance—who sent him coquettish looks in return—then frowned at Barrett. "I have known Siggleshorpe since university. He has a small barony nearby but spends most of his time in London or inviting himself to his neighbor's houses. As you've seen, his charm excuses him from a great many vices. You will like him."

Barrett would have expected those last words to be said with a grin and a wink, but Anthony's face remained completely implacable. So much so that Barrett wondered if he'd been insulted. The urge to lash out at his lover and to tell him to please remove the stick that had somehow managed to find its way up his arse was strong, but Barrett took a deep breath and pushed it aside.

"This does not suit you, Your Grace," he said, staring hard into Anthony's eyes.

"I beg your pardon?" Anthony blinked at him, and behind the cool mask of respectability, Barrett saw indignation spark in his eyes. It

was the same sort of indignation that had led to their deeply satisfying bedsport the other night, which Barrett took as a good sign.

"You are not this dull, polite man, Anthony," he said, lowering his voice and stepping closer still to Anthony. "It pains me to see you playing the duke as dictated by your aunt instead of allowing yourself to be the vibrant and expressive man I know you to be."

Anthony's eyes widened by a fraction, but other than that, the only way Barrett could tell he'd affected the man was through the emotion that radiated from him. "I am many things, Lord Copeland," he said through a clenched jaw, peeking around as though anxious their conversation would be observed. "One of them is, indeed, a duke with obligations toward his elders and a house filled with guests. Forgive me if I do not abandon all to run off into the woods for an inappropriate dalliance."

He stepped away, moving gracefully on to rejoin the greedy misses who awaited him, leaving Barrett stung and hurting. It did not matter that a tiny voice in a corner of his mind whispered that Anthony was right, that he had indeed been burdened with obligations he couldn't easily escape, but most of him was heartbroken. Inappropriate dalliance? Was that all Anthony thought of him? After all the things they'd shared in the past fortnight, all the sighs and pleasure, all of the sweet conversations that followed long into the night? Barrett had never opened himself up to those sorts of things along with sharing his body, and to be told off in such a manner by the man he—

No, it could not possibly be true. He was adventuresome and daring, but he was not mad. It was an affair of the body, not an affair of the heart. But if so, why did it hurt so deeply when he glanced to Anthony only to have his lover thoroughly ignore him?

"Too late indeed," a silken voice spoke by Barrett's side, snapping his attention away from Anthony. Red and Siggleshorpe had approached him while he'd been lost in his emotions. Siggleshorpe wore a grin that was somehow sympathetic as well as sly. "If I had known about—" he nodded to Anthony, "—I would have visited Wodehouse Abbey far more often."

"My brother did not know himself until quite recently," Red said, then rushed right on to, "Allow me to finish my introductions. Percy, you've now met Barrett. Barrett, this is Lord Percival Montague, Baron Siggleshorpe. Percy is great fun, as I'm certain you'll see. And Percy, Barrett has been like a brother to me and will perhaps continue to be so, should the stars align correctly, so behave with him."

"I do so enjoy it when stars align," Siggleshorpe said, extending a soft hand to Barrett with a lascivious look, as though Red hadn't more or less just blurted to the man that he and Anthony were lovers. "Behaving, however, is not a pastime I enjoy."

“The pleasure is all mine,” Barrett said, taking the man’s hand. He was surprised by the strength of Siggleshorpe’s grip. It seemed there was more to the man than his foppish exterior hinted at.

“Dear, no, I suspect the pleasure is someone else’s,” Siggleshorpe said. “But I believe I would enjoy becoming friends all the same. Now, tell me which of the footmen in the house you find to be the most fetching,” he went on, drawing Barrett and Red into taking a turn about the room as though they were young ladies on promenade.

Barrett let himself be dragged along, but his mind and his heart were elsewhere. All he’d wanted was a summer of enjoyment with a willing bedmate. It unsettled him to think that Anthony might had become more than that without Barrett’s trying. Worse still, now that Anthony was determined to play the duke again, Barrett feared he was in danger of having the door slammed on his heart the moment he’d opened it.

It had seemed like such a grand idea. *Seemed* being the important word in that phrase. Invite a few gentlemen to divert Lady Sophia. Simple. Then Aunt Georgiana had involved herself, and now the entire situation was entirely beyond his reckoning or control. Anthony would have sighed and scrubbed his hands over his face as he stood off to one side of Wodehouse Abbey's ballroom—which was decorated as magically as any ballroom in London during the height of the Season and just as packed with guests—if he hadn't known with absolute certainty that everyone around him expected him to present himself as the perfect duke.

Everyone but Barrett, that was.

"You seem to have disenchanted your charming companion somehow, Your Grace," Percy commented to Anthony with a sly grin as the two of them stood side by side, surveying the sea of swirling guests dancing in the center of the room. "I was given to understand that there would be quite a display of clandestine affection and stolen glances, but the interactions I have witnessed thus far have been as frosty as January." Percy arched one eyebrow at Anthony. "Which is as much an indicator of an attachment as the opposite behavior."

It took everything Anthony had not to grimace and turn bright red at Percy's too-insightful observations. He had barely come to terms with his own feelings for Barrett. To have someone else point them out and imply that they were obvious was deeply unsettling. Worse still, Percy hadn't seemed remotely surprised to discover Anthony was involved with another man. Had Percy guessed all along, even when Anthony was oblivious to his own inclinations? Were those inclinations obvious to anyone who shared them, and if so, had everyone else thought him a fool for years?

Anthony had spent his entire life devoting his every waking hour to not looking like a fool, and it appeared as though it were all for naught.

"Copeland is not the only one who is out of sorts this evening," Anthony answered Percy's statement at last, as if everyone else's upset were a defense for his emotions. "It would seem the ball is not turning out as several of its participants would like."

That was truer than could be said. Across the room from where Anthony and Percy stood, Mr. Seymour was engaged in what appeared to be a merry conversation with several young ladies from Hull whom he had specifically asked to be invited for the evening. He'd explained that one of them, Lady Helena, was a childhood friend of whom he was quite fond. Yet for all her smiles, Lady Helena continually glanced out to the lines of the country dance, then back at Seymour, as if willing him to ask her to dance. The young lady clearly had her sights set on him, poor thing. Meanwhile, Bolton stood off to one side, glaring at the group as though he would strike the ladies to dust with his gaze so that he could abduct Seymour and carry him off into the woods to do unspeakable things to him. Seymour likely would have enjoyed that, but appeared momentarily oblivious to his lover.

A different drama was unfolding in another corner of the ballroom as Lady Sylvia and Lady Constance appeared to have had a falling out in the last few days. Anthony was well aware that the quarrel had broken out the day before, when he had been on the verge of accepting Lady Constance's invitation to accompany him on the walk their entire party partook of, only to have Lady Sylvia swoop in and claim the spot beside him. Lady Constance was left to walk a step behind them. It had all been ridiculous, and Anthony would have rather walked with Barrett a thousand times over than to have been anchored by any of the female guests, but to throw any young lady over in favor of Barrett not only would have raised suspicions, it would have inspired the wrath of his aunt.

Aunt Georgiana was so bound and determined to make a success of the house party—her definition of which had expanded from engaging Anthony to Lady Sophia to seeing that every single man in attendance, Redmond and Barrett included, became engaged as well—that it had quelled any enjoyment the woman might have found in the company of friends and neighbors she'd known for most of her life but hadn't seen in years. She flitted about from one group of guests to another, badgering the young people to speak to each other, and pushing any single gentleman who stood idly by into asking one of the unattached ladies to dance. The result was that Aunt Georgiana appeared harried and tense, and that she left a sea of disgruntled guests in her wake wherever she went in the ballroom.

"Not everyone is passing the evening in misery," Percy went on, nodding across the room to where Lord Overton had finally seemed to gather the courage to approach Barrett and his sister. Barrett and Lady Sophia stood with their heads together in some sort of heated conversation—a conversation that was most likely about Anthony, since the two of them kept glancing in his direction—near the open French doors. "I feel as though we should place a wager on whether

that pup snatches the bone in the end,” Percy added, gesturing to Overton.

Anthony hummed noncommittally and watched with Percy to see what would happen. Overton dodged around a group of older gentlemen from the surrounding countryside who appeared to have sampled too much of his wine and past Mr. Goddard. Goddard—whom Anthony was unhappy about inviting, but had yet to find time to discuss business with and felt he owed the man some sort of acknowledgment in the interim—was chatting animatedly with a middle-aged widow who was decidedly above his station. He sent Overton an alarmed look as he passed. When Overton finally reached Barrett and his sister, the siblings inched away from each other and Lady Sophia put on a polite smile.

“Very good,” Percy commented as Overton bowed and addressed himself to Lady Sophia. “The pup has impeccable manners. He appears to be making polite conversation before moving in for the kill. Engage the brother first. Yes, nicely done.”

Indeed, Overton said something to Barrett with an easy posture that hinted of small talk. Barrett relaxed infinitesimally as they spoke, telling Anthony the topic was genial and light.

“There you go, lad. Sweet and amiable.” Percy continued his commentary. Anthony thought it was a shame that the man didn’t have opera glasses to watch the display. “Now flatter the lady. Gently, gently.”

Overton inclined his head slightly to Lady Sophia, whose smile lost some of its stiff quality and turned bright.

“Now offer your hand,” Percy went on, practically vibrating with delight.

As if Overton could hear him, he presented his hand to Lady Sophia just as the orchestra played the closing strains of one song and prepared for the next dance. Lady Sophia curtsied slightly, then took Overton’s hand.

“Good lad,” Percy nearly cheered. “Well done.” Anthony was surprised Percy didn’t applaud. He turned to Anthony instead and said, “I’ve been informed that your paramour’s sister has her eye on you, but you’ve no need to concern yourself there. Overton will win her in the end. What the man lacks in physical perfection, he clearly makes up for in determination and sweetness.”

Anthony sighed—for Percy’s blatant reference to Barrett as his lover as much as anything else—and shook his head slightly. “She will not give up the prize that easily.”

Indeed, no sooner had Lady Sophia accepted Overton’s invitation than she glanced firmly in Anthony’s direction. Her look was flirtatious and scolding at once, as though she were demanding to

know why Anthony had not been the one to escort her out for the Quadrille. Never mind the fact that he'd already danced once with her early in the ball.

Lady Sophia's was not the gaze that captured him, though. As soon as Barrett gave up his sister to Overton, he fixed his attention on Anthony. Anthony felt the look as though the two of them were standing alone together in a heated embrace. Though which kind of heat he couldn't determine. Whether out of anger or simply because it had become dangerously impractical with so many guests in the house, Barrett had not come to Anthony's room for the last three nights, since the house party began. Anthony had erroneously assumed that he would not miss something he had only just begun to experience. Not having Barrett's body beside him through the night had made it exceptionally difficult to sleep. He tried to tell himself it was because he no longer had the exhaustive output of energy or the relaxing burst of orgasm to lull him to sleep, but deep down, he knew that wasn't it.

He missed Barrett. He missed the easy way they'd been together, the laughter they'd shared, and the way they could simply be together without artifice or complication. Anthony had the horrible feeling he'd offended Barrett the afternoon when the houseguests arrived by implying that what existed between them was something that he personally saw as a distraction instead of what he'd truly meant—that society at large would judge him unworthy of his responsibilities if he chose his own pleasure over the responsibilities heaped on his shoulders. Then again, Barrett knew full well how he felt on that score, and Anthony knew just as well how deeply Barrett disdained him for his dedication to duty.

Anthony let out a frustrated sigh before he could stop himself. It was more than enough to cause Percy to turn to him with an assessing look.

"Dear me," Percy said, his ever so slightly rouged lips twitching at one corner. "Could it be worse than I thought?"

Anthony sent him a sideways frown. "You are judging me for my indiscretions," he said.

"Oh, no," Percy replied with unusual candor. "One should never judge another for their choices in love. Love is what gives us life and defines our character. Who we love and how we express that love defines a man far more than their class or profession, or even their intelligence or competence. I have only just become acquainted with Lord Copeland, but I find him to be honest and upright, not to mention damn good fun."

Anthony jerked his head to stare directly at Percy. The man was a libertine, and if he so much as thought of taking Barrett away from

him....

"Now, now," Percy scolded, as if he could read Anthony's thoughts. "I would not dream of it. But you do realize that the vehemence of that simple gesture and the murder in your eyes says more than any polite bow to the coterie of lovelies your aunt has displayed for you, or any invitation to dance a few sets that you might extend. We do not choose love, my friend. She chooses us."

"I do not—" Anthony began, but realized there was no way he could end that sentence in such a public room that would not cause a scandal if overheard. The rest of the conversation had been perilous enough already. Instead, he cleared his throat and said, "As I do wish my aunt would come to understand, I have only the capacity to love my children at this point in my life. There is simply no room for anyone else at present."

"A convenient lie if ever I heard one," Percy said with a wink. "Now, if you will excuse me, I believe that fetching young man attempting to hide behind the potted fern is signaling me in a particular way, and since my entire reason for attending this lovely house party is to acquaint myself with new friends, I must go and introduce myself."

Percy bowed and stepped away with a look of such wickedness that it left Anthony speechless. It also left him wondering how he could have possibly missed how shamelessly libidinous Percy was. Watching him sidle across the room to a man whom Anthony believed to be a younger son of one of his aunt's old friends dropped the scales from his eyes. How could he not have realized what Percy was like? Or perhaps it was just one more way in which he'd kept his own truth hidden from himself by refusing to see it in others.

He shook his head, pushing away his thoughts of Percy and everything the man said. After mentioning his children in the conversation, Anthony suddenly couldn't think of anyone else. He'd barely seen Eliza and Francis since the house party began, let alone spent the sort of time he would have wanted with them. Suddenly, they were the only people whose company he could tolerate, and without taking his leave of any of his guests or his friends, he turned and marched out of the room.

He was able to make it to the hallway and up the stairs without being waylaid, which he counted as a miracle. Once past the first floor, he doubled his pace, tempted to take the stairs to the nursery two and three at a time as the overwhelming need to hug his children gripped him.

"Papa, you look splendid," Eliza greeted Anthony with an awed look as soon as he entered the nursery.

Both Eliza and Francis were dressed in their nightclothes and

looked to be on their way to bed. Ivy, their nursemaid, gave a start at Anthony's appearance, but even she paused to admire Anthony once he was there.

"You look very fine, Your Grace," she said with a deep curtsy, her cheeks pinking. "Is there something I could do for you, Your Grace? Only, I was about to put the children to bed."

"I can do it," Anthony offered, even though it was an outlandishly sentimental thing to offer while a ball was taking place under his roof. He stepped farther into the room. "You can take the rest of the night off, Ivy."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Ivy laughed lightly, "but I've a great many duties to see to before I can rest." She headed out of the playroom all the same, though.

Her words struck home to Anthony in an unexpected way. How many more duties must he see to before he could rest, or were a duke's duties never completed?

"I can help with the children."

Anthony's heart leapt in his chest and he spun at the sound of Barrett's voice to face the doorway. Barrett looked gorgeous, bathed in the soft light of the nursery as he was, the smile on his face for Francis and Eliza as much as for him. He was an entirely different man than the one he had been in the stuffy, noisy ballroom. The man before Anthony now made his heart leap and spin in his chest more beautifully than any of the dances taking place downstairs.

"Ooh, Barrett, you look lovely as well," Eliza said, her face shining with adoration as she left the book she'd carried on the nursery table and rushed to greet him.

"My lady, you are prettier by far than any of the fancy misses in the ballroom just now," Barrett told her, accepting the hug Eliza so freely offered.

Not to be outdone, Francis crossed the room to stand between Barrett and Anthony, frowning. "She is not lovely," he pointed out. "She's wearing a nightgown."

"The prettiest flowers have no need of embellishment," Barrett informed him, then glanced to Anthony. "They are most beautiful in their natural surroundings, without adornment."

Blast the man, but he said such endearing things, even when Anthony believed himself to be angry with him.

"Adornment is not so bad either," he said, risking all by letting his affection show in his expression. "It makes some things irresistibly handsome."

"That it does," Barrett returned the surreptitious compliment. Their gaze held for far longer than was reasonable until Barrett took in a breath and turned his attention back to the children. "Does your

papa need assistance tucking you into bed?"

"Yes, he does," Francis declared, beaming.

"All right," Anthony said. "Off to your rooms, then."

It was a shame that Francis's bedchamber was off to one side of the nursery and Eliza's was on the other, but Eliza was too old now to share a room with her brother. In a few years' time, she would be too grown up for a room in the nursery at all, which sent a pang of something bittersweet through Anthony's chest. The world of children moved too fast, and if he could have, he would have captured as much of it as he could to keep with him always. He wished there were a way he and Barrett could tuck the children into beds in the same room, together, perhaps sitting and reading to them for a while or listening to Barrett tell stories of his days on the high seas.

As it was, they divided and conquered. Barrett shuffled Eliza off to her room and Anthony took Francis to his and helped him into bed, then pulled the covers up to his chin.

"I love you, Papa," Francis said happily as Anthony kissed his forehead and smoothed his hair. "I am glad you are home. I wish you never had to go to horrible London and that we could stay together always. And Barrett."

The innocent afterthought pierced Anthony's heart like an arrow. "I wish that too, my boy," Anthony said, then hid his burst of emotion by kissing Francis's head again before standing and heading back across the nursery.

He and Barrett crossed paths in the center of the playroom, and as their eyes met, the sentiment swirling deep within Anthony's chest seemed to grow and blossom. The air between them seemed to sizzle with the energy that had almost been forgotten in the last few days. Their arms brushed as they walked past each other, and for a moment, Anthony could have sworn he felt Barrett's fingers brush against his.

He walked on to Eliza's room, his heart thundering in his chest. Eliza waited patiently in her bed, her blankets already tucked expertly under her chin, a serene smile on her youthful face.

"Good night, my love," Anthony said, sitting on the side of her bed and kissing her forehead. "May all of your dreams be filled with fairies and sweets."

Eliza giggled sleepily at that idea. "I dreamed about you the other night, Papa," she said.

"Did you?" Tender emotion wrapped its way around Anthony's heart as he stroked Eliza's head. Nothing downstairs could come close to the joy he felt in that simple moment.

"I dreamed that you and me and Francis and Barrett had a picnic in the garden, and Cook made the most delicious raspberry tart in all of Christendom," Eliza said, her eyes wide.

Anthony laughed, wondering which aspect of the dream his daughter found most important.

In a way, she answered when she said, "Can Barrett stay, Papa? After the summer, I mean. Can he stay always?"

The warmth around Anthony's heart squeezed so tightly it threatened to bring tears to his eyes. His children wanted Barrett in their lives. He wanted Barrett too. The two things he wanted most in life were perfectly compatible, if he was careful. Most touching of all, like Percy, his children would not judge him for who he loved. They were too young to understand, of course, but perhaps that was a blessing. Perhaps their acceptance would come easily, once they finally reached full understanding, if Barrett was already a beloved part of their lives.

"We shall see, my love," he said, bending to kiss Eliza's forehead one more time before standing.

He turned to find Barrett standing in the doorway, watching him with a look of bold affection. Anthony's heart sped up as he stepped away from Eliza's bed, blew out the lantern, and left the room, closing the door all but a crack behind him. Francis's door was similarly closed, which meant he and Barrett were alone.

Without either of them needing to say a word, they slipped into each other's arms and their mouths met. In the past few weeks, Anthony had kissed Barrett hundreds of times in hundreds of ways, but there was something different, sweeter, in that kiss. It ran deep, down to his soul, and filled him with far more than just arousal. Barrett's arms closing around him felt like home. It was a sensation he was certain he'd never felt before, one that he was reasonably certain could be love, and he didn't want it to ever end.

End it did, though. Just as Barrett's kiss turned aggressive and their tongues started to search and stroke in a way that portended more, Ivy exclaimed, "Oh, your ladyship, whatever brings you up to the nursery so late at night?" out in the hall.

Anthony and Barrett leapt apart so quickly that Anthony nearly tumbled and fell backwards. Barrett strode to the table and picked up the book Eliza had deposited there, and by the time Aunt Georgiana stepped into the room, the two of them looked as innocent as circumstances allowed them to look.

"Where have you been, Anthony?" Aunt Georgiana demanded. "You've a dozen young ladies in need of dances who have been inquiring after you this last half hour. And you, Lord Copeland." She turned to Barrett. "I am a friend of your mother's, you realize. She would very much like to see you happily wed before Christmas as well. Both of you, come downstairs at once."

Anthony exchanged a wide-eyed look with Barrett, both because

they'd nearly been caught, and because his aunt was not going to give up on the idea of a match for Barrett as well. The sparkle of renewed humor and desire in Barrett's eyes was enough to send Anthony's heart soaring.

"Putting my children to bed is more important than attending a ball, Aunt Georgiana," he said with as much authority as he could muster without offending his aunt outright as he started toward the door. Barrett followed silently behind him. "As they are fond of Lord Copeland as well, he came to bid them good night."

Aunt Georgiana made a scoffing sound, but there was no suspicion in it. "You have a nursemaid to tend to the children," she insisted as they passed Ivy in the hall. She sent Ivy a disapproving look.

Anthony, on the other hand, gave Ivy a look of profound gratitude. Perhaps it was a good thing after all that his staff knew all.

"Lady Sophia in particular is eager to dance with you again," Aunt Georgiana went on. "I promised her I would fetch you so that you could complete another set with her. She is such a lovely young woman, wouldn't you agree? And how fortunate that she is the sister of your good friend."

"Fortunate indeed," Anthony said, resigning himself to the fact that his aunt would prattle on until they were downstairs.

He exchanged a look with Barrett as his aunt did just that, but he didn't hear a word she said. The only lips he was concerned with were Barrett's and Barrett's was the only company he wanted to keep. Perhaps there was a way for the two of them to slip free of his aunt's machinations after all. If only he could reconcile his feeling for Barrett with everything else in his life.

Everything was beautiful on the outside the next day. The short-lived storm that rushed along the coast just as the ball was ending and the guests who were not staying at Wodehouse Abbey were departing cooled the summer heat and fed the grass. When the sun rose over the choppy sea, everything was blossoming and verdant. By lunchtime, even the residual wind had died down, leaving Wodehouse Abbey bathed in sunshine, balmy breezes, and the general good feelings of its inhabitants.

Barrett attempted to embrace it and to push aside the lingering worries that had dogged him with increasing intensity since the ill-advised house party had begun, but it was more difficult than he'd expected it to be. The tender moment he and Anthony had shared in the nursery halfway through the ball had been a sensual oasis in the desert of doubt he'd been suffering through. For those few moments, the excitement of their affair had reignited, but along with it came a deeper, sweeter sort of attachment. Barrett fought with everything he had to avoid the truth, but it was increasingly unavoidable. And then it had been painful when Anthony let Lady Grosmont lead him back to the ballroom, where he spent the rest of the night dancing every set with whichever young lady his aunt ordered him to. Anthony danced twice more with Sophia, which sent a dangerous message indeed.

Barrett watched his sister practically hanging off of Anthony's arm now, as the house party guests assembled on the south lawn for various games, including a mad variation of tennis that Red had concocted to be played out of doors instead of in a court. Sophia appeared to be asking Anthony which racquet he thought she should select, which indicated she wanted to play. Worse still, Anthony appeared to be humoring her. The way Lady Grosmont smiled approvingly at the conversation sent dread through Barrett's heart. Anthony was his. Barrett was certain of it, whether he was comfortable with the implications in his own heart or not. But that wasn't enough to convince him that Anthony wouldn't do something unspeakably foolish, like marrying Sophia simply because his aunt convinced him marriage was his duty.

The idea was abhorrent to Barrett and it wouldn't leave his mind,

no matter how intensely he participated in a game of lawn bowling with a Septimus and a pair of Lady Grosmont's male guests, whose names he couldn't quite remember. Spalding? Spalter? It didn't matter. As much as he pretended to be absorbed in bowling, his gaze continually slipped across the lawn to Anthony and Sophia. He wouldn't marry her. There had been too much fire in their kiss the night before. Even if Lady Grosmont hounded him, even if Sophia pressed her suit like a general, even if Anthony got the idea into his head that if he married Sophia, no one would question why Barrett lived at Wodehouse Abbey as well.

"Do be careful, Copeland," Red called from across the bowling green, where Barrett had just rolled his ball so hard he sent a few of the pins flying dangerously toward those who were spectating. "That pin nearly hit my kneecap, and I need both kneecaps."

"Sorry," Barrett grumbled, trying not to glance across to Anthony and his sister again and failing. It hadn't occurred to him that Anthony might see marriage to Sophia as a way to keep him in his life, but now that the thought had occurred, it had Barrett's chest constricting and his head spinning. "Forgive me," he told Spalding, stepping away from the green. "I must bow out of the game. I believe the sun has baked my head a bit too much."

"Take some refreshment, man," Spalding told him with a friendly nod. "There is punch of some sort up near the house."

Barrett nodded his thanks to the man and headed up toward the house, feeling as though he might be ill. Anthony wouldn't go through with a mad scheme like that, would he? Not even to keep Barrett close to him. As far as he was concerned, Barrett didn't need an excuse to stay at Wodehouse Abbey as long as he wanted, or as long as Anthony wanted. There was no duty or semblance of duty that took precedence over his feelings for Anthony. But Anthony didn't think like him, as they both knew well. Barrett wouldn't put it past the bastard to try to appease everyone, and as a result, ruin everything.

"Slow down, Romeo," Red called as he jogged up to Barrett from behind and fell into step with him. "You look as though you're storming off to start a war."

Barrett stopped and blew out a breath, rubbing a hand over his face. They were far enough from any of the activities on the lawn that if he spoke quietly, no one would overhear them, so he said, "I fear something terrible has happened, Red."

Red grinned as though Barrett had announced some new scheme that would get them all in trouble. He crossed his arms and studied Barrett with a look as though he already knew everything. "Have things advanced in ways I don't know yet?"

Barrett shifted his stance, mirroring Red a bit so that any observer

would think they were discussing matters of business. He didn't want to give voice to the suspicions that had been growing in him for days, but Red was his closest friend, and as Anthony was his brother, he deserved the truth. "I think it's love," he mumbled.

Red broke into laughter. "Of course it's love, you dolt. Did you think that it wasn't?"

Barrett shrugged, caught between feeling sheepish over his emotions and frustrated that Red wasn't taking them seriously. "I thought it was an affair, a bit of fun for the summer. I thought I was teaching a man who has only just discovered himself how to find pleasure."

Red laughed again and shook his head. "You're a bloody fool, then. My brother would never throw over his boring, responsible life to spend every waking moment rutting in the bushes—and do not think for a moment that everyone in this house doesn't know that is what the two of you were doing before all these damnable guests arrived—if it wasn't love."

Barrett frowned even as his heart lifted in hope. "This damnable house party was your idea, if you will remember."

"*This* was certainly *not* what I had in mind when I suggested alternatives for your sister," Red said, then quickly went on with, "You are dodging the matter at hand."

"Because I've no idea what to do about it," Barrett insisted. "I know nothing of being in love. Fucking, yes, I can do that well, but love?" He flapped his mouth uselessly for a moment, making a gesture of utter bafflement, then said, "How do you manage being in love with Lucas?"

"I am *not* in love with Lucas," Red snapped so fast that it made Barrett flinch. "I never have been, and I wish the lot of you would banish that notion from your brains."

Barrett smirked at him. "Not in love with Lucas?"

"Not at all. He's my favorite bedmate, that is all. And you are once again avoiding the matter at hand, namely the delightful fact that you and my brother have fallen in love."

Barrett wasn't the only one avoiding a matter of love, but he conceded that Red's tangle with Lucas Salterford would have to wait. "How far do you believe your brother would go to fulfill what he believed to be his duty?" he asked, sending a worried frown in Anthony's direction. Sophia had noticed Barrett heading towards her and had leaned close to Anthony to say something while looking straight at Barrett.

Red seemed to guess where Barrett's thoughts were headed. "He won't marry," he said with far more certainty than Barrett felt. "Aunt Georgiana thinks she can command Anthony like an army, but

Anthony only appears to bow to her. Underneath that dukish exterior, my brother has a will of iron. He loves you, and he will remain faithful to you."

Barrett only wished he could believe it. Part of him did believe it, but he'd seen too many men, particularly men of their ilk, choose the safer path. He marched on, bracing himself for the worst as he approached his sister and his lover.

"There you are, Barrett," Sophia greeted him with a smile, stepping away from Anthony to kiss Barrett's cheek. "You must help me advance my suit," she whispered quickly in his ear. A moment later, she rocked back and said in a normal voice, "I was just attempting to convince His Grace to play this mad game Lord Beverly has invented."

"Lord Beverly did not invent tennis," Barrett said, trying for his sister's sake—and for Anthony's as well—to appear as cheerful and amiable as could be.

"Perhaps not, but he did invent this variation of it," Sophia insisted. She turned to Anthony and stood in such a way that the sunlight accented her best features. "My brother was forever inventing games when we were younger. I am certain your brother acquired the habit from him."

"My brother and yours have been inventing games since they arrived at Wodehouse Abbey," Anthony said with a perfectly respectable smile and a nod.

They grated on Barrett's nerves. Once again, entirely expectedly, Anthony had locked away the man he truly was in favor of the duke he believed that he should be. And the man Anthony believed he should be might just be capable of marrying a woman he could never love at the expense of a lover who had changed his world. It was maddening, but Barrett felt increasingly as though there were nothing he could do about it.

"If you would like to play a doubles game of tennis, I could play," Lord Overton offered, jumping to join their group from the sidelines, where he had ostensibly been examining a pall-mall set. Barrett would have wagered anything the young man had been eavesdropping in the hopes of capturing Sophia's attention.

"Yes." Barrett brightened. "Why don't you and my sister pair up, and His Grace and I will form the other pair." Barrett glanced hopefully to Anthony.

The barest hint of a genuine smile touched Anthony's lips, but before it could grow, Sophia said, "Oh, no, that will never do. I have already agreed to be Malton's partner." She reached for Anthony's arm. "I rather like the sound of that." Anthony—who had been staring at Barrett—flinched as though he hadn't realized Sophia were there at all. "And my brother will need a female partner to round things out,"

Sophia continued.

“Yes, yes, that is a splendid idea,” Lady Grosmont said, surging forward. It seemed as though Overton wasn’t the only one eavesdropping on the conversation. Barrett was alarmed by how many people wanted something to do with their business and noted to himself to be careful going forward. “Lady Sylvia, Lord Copeland here needs a partner,” Lady Grosmont called loudly toward the refreshment table, where Lady Sylvia and two others were deliberately not speaking to Lady Constance and another woman, proving that minor drama was still in force.

Lady Sylvia broke away from her friends and glided across the lawn as though she were on display at court. “I would be happy to partner with any friend of His Grace’s,” she said, sending Anthony a winning smile, then firing a superior look at Lady Constance.

“Oh Lord,” Barrett muttered under his breath.

Red, who had caught up to his side, did a poor job of stifling a laugh.

Lady Grosmont guided Lady Sylvia the rest of the way to Barrett’s side. “Lord Beverly is a viscount in his own right and will be an earl someday, dear,” she told the young woman as if scolding her for not considering Barrett as a suitor.

“How lovely,” Lady Sylvia said with a patently false smile as she came to stand by Barrett’s side.

Barrett was as polite as he could be to her, considering he didn’t have the least bit of interest in the woman either. He was too busy, as Lady Sylvia was as well, glaring at Anthony and his sister, who were being too friendly with each other for Barrett’s comfort. Not that he objected to Sophia and Anthony being friends. In fact, it would be grand if the three of them formed a mutual friendship. But with marriage in the air, it was a risk Barrett was loath to take.

“I could serve as umpire,” Overton offered, exuberant as always. “I will fetch racquets and balls for everyone.”

As Overton scrambled off, Lady Sylvia’s brow furrowed with worry. “Partnered for *tennis*?” she asked as though just realizing why she’d been called over.

“Yes, dear, let me explain,” Lady Grosmont said, then drew Lady Sylvia aside, apparently to give her a lecture.

“I will assist Overton,” Anthony said with a nod for Sophia. He sent Barrett a significant look, then turned and marched away.

A burst of frustration hit Barrett as Anthony turned his back on him. What was the man doing? It was long past time that Anthony put his foot down and sent all of the houseguests home. Red was right, it was the worst idea any of them had had in a month. Things had been going so well before the invasion of guests, and now Barrett couldn’t

help but feel as though everything he wanted was at stake. Especially since he was admitting to himself more and more with each minute that ticked by that he loved Anthony. And blast it all, it had been days and days since the two of them had done more than kiss. His balls were aching to be emptied, and not just into his own sheets.

"Barry, are you quite well?" Sophia asked, stepping over to Barrett's side and frowning at him. "You look bilious."

"I am fine," Barrett snapped, proving that he wasn't. "I have lost my patience for this house party. I wish to return to the peace and quiet of the countryside before the lot of you arrived."

Sophia's brow shot up. "When have you, Barrett Landers, ever craved peace and quiet?" She turned to glance at Anthony, and for one horrible moment, Barrett thought she'd discovered the truth. "This is my chance, Barry," she appealed to him, turning back. "Please. I know you abhor the idea of selling me off to the highest bidder as much as I do, but Malton is kind and gentle and a duke. Please help me win him. Speak with him. Convince him I am his match. Anything, I beg of you."

It was Barrett's turn to be surprised. He knew in the back of his mind that Sophia disliked the ways of society as much as he did, but hearing her talk of what their mother called his duty to see her married as selling her off to the highest bidder made the truth hit home. He glanced over to where Anthony and Overton were filling their arms with racquets and tennis balls. Perhaps it would be a kindness for Sophia and Anthony to marry after all.

He rejected that thought as soon as it struck him. Anthony was his and his alone. His gaze slipped from Anthony to Overton as the two men walked back to join them, equipment in hand. "I promise you, Soph," he said with a sigh, "before this house party is over, you will be engaged."

"Perfect," Sophia squealed with a smile. She lifted to her toes and pressed a kiss to Barrett's cheek. "You are a good and faithful brother."

Barrett tolerated the peck with a smile, his eyes trained on Anthony as Sophia hurried to his side. Anthony glanced Barrett's way as Sophia took a racquet from him, but the man was so deeply mired in presenting himself as the duke that Barrett had a hard time reading his expression. He wanted to be alone with Anthony to talk through the feelings that had taken root in him and wouldn't let go. He wanted to spread the man's legs and pound into him until they were both mad with ecstasy, then flip to his stomach and have Anthony peg him until neither of them could see straight, but all of that would have to wait until the mountain of troubles in front of them was dealt with.

"Are you ready, my lord?" Overton asked, handing Barrett one of

the racquets and smiling as though he were in paradise.

Barrett faced him with a determined smile. "I want you to marry my sister," he said as bluntly as if he were hitting a tennis ball over a net.

Overton nearly dropped the second racquet and the balls he held in shock. "I beg your pardon?"

"I think you would make the perfect husband for my sister," Barrett continued as directly as he'd started.

Overton looked confused. "But—" he glanced across the net to where Anthony and Sophia had taken up positions and were batting a tennis ball back and forth, "—you would not prefer the duke, your friend, to be your brother-in-law?"

"Malton has no intention of remarrying," Barrett told the man, speeding his words, as it appeared Lady Grosmont had finished bullying Lady Sylvia into the game. Clearly, Lady Sylvia did not want to play after all. "He will only disappoint her, and when he does, the iron will be hot for you to strike. And as I believe you could make my sister genuinely happy, I give you leave to play every card in your hand to woo her."

"I...er...that is...thank you, my lord," Overton stammered, then burst into a smile.

"Pray tell, is this new, invented version of out-of-doors tennis a short game?" Lady Sylvia asked, marching over to them and taking a racquet from Overton as though taking the axe for her own execution.

"I believe we could make it so," Barrett told her, careful to exhibit compassion and understanding in his mien as he led the lady to their side of the grass court, "if we play badly enough."

Lady Sylvia's petulant frown transformed into a conciliatory, almost amused grin. Unfortunately for Barrett, that morphed into a look of assessment, as though perhaps she had been wrong about him. "I shall endeavor to live down to your expectations, my lord," she said with a fetching smile.

Inwardly, Barrett rolled his eyes. The last thing they needed was another besotted woman searching up the wrong tree. He glanced across the net to Anthony, only to find him watching with a frown that would have been unreadable to anyone else, but was a clear sign of disapproval to Barrett.

"Would you like to serve, Your Grace?" Barrett asked, taking up a spot corresponding to Anthony's on his side of the net. "I believe the ball is in your court."

"Quite," Anthony answered with ducal elegance.

The game was short and pitiful. For one, tennis was not conceived of to be played on grass that had received a great deal of rain the night before. For another, it was nearly impossible to reach for a

flying ball in a tailored jacket, Hessian boots, or, in the case of the ladies, long skirts that had a tendency to trip and wide-brimmed sunbonnets. The absolute disaster of the game ended up being a source of amusement to all of the players, though. Or perhaps it was the disappointment that Lady Grosmont vocalized from the side of the court.

"No!" she fretted as Sophia served a ball to Lady Sylvia with a soft, slow flight and Lady Sylvia barely reached her racquet out toward it. "You are supposed to hit the ball, Lady Sylvia. It is supposed to sail back over the net." She made a gesture as if to demonstrate.

From the other side of the court, Lady Constance and her friend sniggered behind their hands, which nearly brought Lady Sylvia to tears.

"Pay no mind to them, my lady," Barrett said, retrieving the ball she'd let drop and tossing it back over the net to Anthony. "They are merely jealous that you have been paired with one of the handsomest gentlemen at the house party." He winked cheekily at her, then turned that look to Anthony on the other side of the net.

By some miracle, Anthony grinned flirtatiously back at him, as though he approved of Barrett's attempt to improve Lady Sylvia's spirits. That left Barrett's heart beating furiously against his ribs.

"Match point," Sophia called out as she prepared to serve again to Barrett.

With a firm hit, the ball flew over the net and straight to Barrett. He hit it back to Anthony's side of the court. Anthony backtracked enough to return the volley expertly. Invigorated, Barrett lunged for the ball and managed to send it sailing back over the net. Anthony hit it, then Barrett again, then back to Anthony. The mood of the game flashed to genuine competitiveness as the volley continued. It brought to mind the energy that had existed between Barrett and Anthony when they'd first discovered each other, which had his heart racing even faster.

Anthony volleyed the ball closer to the net, which forced Barrett to charge forward. Rather than smashing the ball to the back of the court, though, he merely tapped it back over the net. Anthony rushed forward to return the clever hit, but as he reached the net, his foot caught in the long grass. He pitched forward, spilling right into the net, and as Barrett was already right up against it, the result was that Anthony barreled right into him.

The two of them went toppling to the ground, taking the net with them. Barrett's racquet flew out of his hand, but he couldn't have cared less. The result of the spill was that he had Anthony splayed over top of him, their bodies tangled together. The net was still between them, but that only meant that Barrett could use the excuse

of pulling at it to close his arms around Anthony.

"It's been too long," he murmured against Anthony's ear, twisting his hips in such a way that Anthony would know exactly what he meant.

"I know," Anthony groaned in return, sounding desperate and almost pitiful.

That only fired Barrett's senses. He loved it when Anthony sounded so needy in bed. "Tonight then," he whispered as Overton and the ladies hurried toward them with various degrees of fuss.

There wasn't time for words, but Anthony pulled back and shook his head. He looked broken by the refusal, but as Barrett had learned was usual for him, he shoved that emotion aside and resumed an air of dignity as Overton helped him to stand.

"Your Grace, are you well?" Lady Sylvia attempted to jump in and help Anthony before Sophia could, which started a glaring match.

"I am quite well," Anthony insisted, backing farther away.

Barrett sighed as Overton moved to help him. Anthony was anything but quite well, and Barrett was completely out of sorts also. Unless drastic measures were taken to stop the madness that swirled around them, the love that Barrett was now certain consumed him would die before it had a chance to live.

There wasn't a single thing that Anthony could possibly think of that could improve on his efforts to be a good host, a good nephew, and a good duke. He had seen to his guests' needs, given up his precious time to conversations with people he barely knew, tried his best not to appear to favor one lady over any others—though Lady Sophia was making that attempt at impartiality next to impossible, and his aunt was clearly on Lady Sophia's side—he'd made certain everyone was well-fed, and he'd even deliberately turned a blind eye when he caught Siggleshorpe and one of his footmen stumbling out of the shrubbery near the orangery, pink-faced, disheveled, and with the footman's breeches fastened incorrectly. Not a soul on his property could have had anything to complain about.

Except Barrett. Because the more Anthony excelled at being a shining example of nobility, the more he knew he was failing as a lover. Worse still, he was no longer steadfastly certain which aspect of himself he truly wanted to nurture. His entire life, the importance of living up to his title had been drummed into him. Now, however, as he sat at the head of a brilliantly-set dining room table, with dozens of important, titled guests chattering away, enjoying themselves immensely, all Anthony could see was Barrett, several places down from him on the right, wedged between Lady Sylvia and Miss Frobshire, pretending to smile while an invisible blanket of misery rested over him.

"And I say that without the nuisance of Bonaparte to muddy the waters, England will inevitably end up as the world's foremost power," Lord Spalding said to Anthony's left.

"Do you truly believe so?" the dowager Countess of Rowley—a woman who had never approved of Anthony, no matter what he did or did not do, but whom his aunt had not only invited, but insisted on seating in a place of honor at his left hand—said with a surprised look for Spalding. "You do not think the Hapsburgs will make a resurgence somehow, as they always seem to, or that the Prussians, who gained so much in the Congress of Vienna, will rise to prominence?"

"Certainly not," Spalding sniffed. "The current century belongs to England. Do you not agree, Your Grace?"

It took Anthony a moment to realize the question had been addressed to him. He was too busy watching the way Barrett ate so slowly, as though he had no appetite. He was transfixed by Barrett's lips, which he'd tasted so briefly the night before and had sorely missed. Falling through the tennis net that afternoon had been the most glorious thing that had happened to him since the blasted house party had begun. It had returned him to Barrett's arms, if only for a few, stolen moments, and had reminded him of where he longed to be.

What sort of a fool was he for rejecting Barrett's invitation to be together? If Siggleshorpe could abscond into the bushes for who knew what sort of activity without being caught, why could he not have left his door unlocked for Barrett to slip into his room and his bed that night? Barrett belonged in his bed. He belonged in every aspect of Anthony's life. The last several days of pretending they were hardly more than acquaintances, never touching, barely having a chance to look at each other or speak of anything important, was maddening to Anthony. What he wouldn't give for just half an hour alone with his lover so they could—

"Your Grace? Your Grace."

Anthony sucked in a breath and blinked rapidly. He shook his head to pull himself out of his thoughts, only to discover that more than just Spalding and Lady Rowley were staring at him. Half a dozen of the guests at his end of the table had dropped their conversations or stopped eating to watch him. The curious concern of his guests was swiftly spreading down the table as more and more people realized something was amiss. That curiosity reached Barrett, who glanced away from his conversation with Lady Sylvia on his right to send a questioning look Anthony's way.

"Your Grace, are you quite well?" Lady Rowley asked.

"I beg your pardon," Anthony said as sedately as possible with heat rushing to his neck and face. "My thoughts were diverted for a moment." He scrambled for a suitable reason, well aware that Barrett was still watching him. His heart longed for Barrett like it longed for sun on a dreary winter's day. "I was informed that my son was feeling unwell earlier, and my thoughts flew to the nursery for a moment." Only half of the statement was a lie. He couldn't shake his memory of the nursery last night for all the world.

It was as if everyone at his end of the table breathed a collective sigh of relief, then smiled at him for being a sentimental papa before going back to their meal and conversations.

Lady Rowley laughed as though she understood everything. "I remember when my children were babes," she said with a faraway look. "I worried over them constantly and fretted over every report that their nursemaid gave me."

Anthony smiled courteously and wondered if Lady Rowley had ever actually visited her progeny herself or if she'd relied on the servants to raise them, as so many members of the aristocracy did. He picked up his fork again to further the appearance of normalcy as Spalding continued his discourse on the superiority of the British.

But once again, his thoughts and his gaze drifted down the table to Barrett. Barrett had never spoken particularly warmly about his parents. Neither had Lady Sophia. Anthony was willing to wager that the two and their brother had been tended to by servants as well. Perhaps that sadness explained why Barrett had become so attached to Francis and Eliza. How lucky his children were to have adults in their lives who cared so much for them. How fortunate it would be if Barrett could stay and share the duties of raising the two into happy, accomplished adults by Anthony's side.

The idea hit Anthony's heart with such a pang that he nearly lost track of the conversation a third time. He managed some conciliatory statement about the might of the British military, but as Spalding agreed with him and waxed poetic over the benefits of British industry, Anthony found himself peering down the table to Barrett once more.

He loved the man. There was no point in denying it anymore or explaining his feelings away as the result of an awakened sexuality. It had been several long days since the last time the two of them had been naked and horizontal together, and Anthony's feelings had only grown in that time. It was not merely lust. Last night in the nursery was all the proof of that Anthony needed. He was in love with Barrett Landers, and he hadn't the first clue what to do about it. Not a soul that he could think of would approve of him throwing off his duties toward the estate, his family, his tenants, and his country for love. Except Francis and Eliza. And Redmond. And Winters, apparently. And most of his staff, who had smiled at him more in the past fortnight than they ever had, kindly at that.

"And if that man, William James, has his way about outfitting the country with rails so that horse carts can be drawn more easily across distances," Spalding had gone on, "there is no telling what will happen. James even suggested that steam engines could somehow be used for transportation, though I find the notion ridiculous."

"Yes, quite," Anthony said. He was doubtful that was a correct response to Spalding's enthusiasm, but the strange thought that more of the people who immediately surrounded his life than not would approve of him giving his heart to Barrett, and perhaps forming a long-term attachment with him, was as astounding as the industrial advances that Spalding was now eager to talk about.

Was it possible that there could be a way forward that might allow

him to do his duty as he'd always seen it *and* to love Barrett as well? Why had he been so certain that the two things were mutually exclusive? If he'd given his heart to another woman, there would be no question at all as to whether he could manage love and duty simultaneously. Why should it be any different if he loved a man? His pulse raced at the prospect, and once again, he glanced down the table to Barrett.

This time, Barrett saw him looking and responded with even greater curiosity. Anthony had to find a way to speak to the man alone. Aunt Georgiana be damned, he wanted Barrett by his side. Surely there was a way to please everyone and disappoint no one, least of all himself.

"That being said, which do you think it will be?" Lady Rowley asked.

Anthony did his level best to pretend he knew what she was talking about. "I could not say," he said with as much confidence as he could, then resorted to what he considered a foolproof conversational tool for any situation by asking, "What do you think, Lady Rowley?"

Without missing a beat, Lady Rowley waved her hand slightly and said, "It should be Lady Sophia Landers, of course. As I understand it, your brother and hers served together on the *Majesty*. Of course, you made quite a pair while conversing with Lady Sylvia Kettering this afternoon, and I dare say her mother would be pleased if she married a duke."

Anthony was grateful that he'd already swallowed the bite he'd taken before Lady Rowley reached her point. He would have choked for certain. It came as a terrible embarrassment that he'd let his attention drift so far that he hadn't realized his marital prospects were being discussed.

"As I said," he managed to squeeze out with as neutral a smile as possible, "I could not say how that particular matter will progress. Lord Spalding, what are your thoughts on the emergence of canals in the waterways of Yorkshire?" He pivoted from one conversational topic to another that was sure to dominate without taking a breath.

"Ah, canals," Spalding said with relish. "They will revolutionize the transportation of goods throughout northern England at the very least."

Anthony considered it a lucky escape, and as Spalding nattered on, he summoned every last bit of willpower he had to pay attention. He could not afford another slip, and he could not afford to have the conversation turn back to future duchesses. His mind was now made up on that score—not that it hadn't been made up from the moment poor Charlotte died all those years ago—and nothing and no one

could convince him to remarry. Unless, perhaps, it miraculous became possible for a man to marry another man.

A burst of laughter from near the other end of the table caught Anthony's attention a few moments later in spite of his best efforts to stay engaged with Spalding. Lady Sophia had evidently caused the disruption due to something Overton, seated on her left, had said. Aunt Georgiana glared at the poor young woman—whether for the uncouth outburst or for showing interest in anyone other than him. Anthony couldn't say—and Barrett also sent her a warning look. Sophia made the subtlest of faces at her brother, but their exchange also caused her to notice that Anthony was studying her.

A pleased flush painted Lady Sophia's face, and she gave Anthony a coquettish look of apology before returning to her supper. Anthony noted that the other young ladies at the table looked mutinous. Aggravatingly, Barrett appeared displeased as well, as if Anthony's public gaze at his sister was some sort of declaration. Taken all in all, it was the last straw.

As soon as supper concluded and the men started off toward the billiard room for their particular evening entertainments, Anthony took his leave of the company.

"Are you quite certain you are not unwell, Your Grace?" Spalding asked as the men wandered down the hall. "We've only just begun to expound upon the value of the cotton trade, but your countenance has turned vacant."

Every fiber in Anthony's body was aware of Barrett as he walked past, appearing casual and uninterested in anything Anthony had to say. "You've found me out, my lord," Anthony smiled carefully for Spalding. "I have a bit of a headache which I believe has been caused by the storm that appears to be coming in, and believe I would benefit from an early night. I do beg your pardon."

"Quite understandable," Spalding said with a sympathetic nod, glancing to the nearest window, where rain was already streaking the panes. So much for an idyllically beautiful and sunny day. "House parties wear one out, that much is certain."

Anthony chuckled as he was expected to and began to move on down the hall, but before he could go more than three steps, Barrett marched up behind him, grasped his arm, and practically goose-stepped him the rest of the way down the hall to his study.

"I will not let you get away from me that easily," Barrett said, practically shoving Anthony into the room.

Anthony was startled by the clear frustration behind Barrett's words and actions. If he didn't know better, he would have thought that Barrett was angry with him. A distant roll of thunder seemed to be Nature's way of emphasizing Barrett's mood. The very thought of

his lover angry with him for no reason had Anthony immediately defensive, in spite of his intentions to express his feelings of love for Barrett. "Retiring early was not a ploy to, as you say, get away from you, Barrett. Quite the opposite. Whatever has you so out of sorts?"

"You have me out of sorts," Barrett said, beginning to pace the room. Another rumble of thunder sounded.

Anthony's defensive walls rose higher. "This is uncalled for. What have I done to rile your temper in such a manner?"

"Do not play the duke with me, Anthony." Barrett scowled as he turned and paced back toward him. "I have watched you hide behind the mantle of your title for days now, and it sickens me."

Anthony's brow shot up. "You have my sincerest apologies for being such a miserable disappointment."

Barrett winced and turned to pace away, rubbing a hand over his face. "I did not mean it like that," he said as he reached the far end of the room, then turned to march back. "I find this entire situation untenable," he confessed, his emotions on his sleeves. "It is not as though I was unaware that you prize duty above all. We have exhausted that subject in conversation, and it has been exhausting."

"If that is not it, then what is it?" Anthony grasped Barrett's arm to hold him to his spot. "I do not like to see you so agitated, and I like it even less that said agitation is directed at me without cause."

"Is it without cause?" Barrett demanded. Something deeper than mere anger lit his eyes. If Anthony wasn't mistaken, a desperate sort of affection had joined the sharper emotion in Barrett's countenance. Whatever it was, it made Anthony's heart squeeze painfully.

"I believe it is," Anthony insisted. "To be frank, I think we have suffered from being forcibly separated from each other these last few days. It has allowed confusion and frustration to come between us, and I want nothing to come between us." He risked everything by meeting Barrett's eyes as though to communicate that clothes and air were two things he did not want between them either.

Barrett surprised him by asking, "Not even my sister as your new duchess?"

Anthony flinched in surprise. "God, no. Whatever made you think that was a real possibility?"

Barrett stared at him in shock. "It would be something of an ideal solution," he said. "Marrying Sophia would appease your aunt and be a fulfillment of your precious duties. Furthermore, it would provide the perfect excuse for me to linger at Wodehouse Abbey in a way that would not raise suspicion."

Anthony stared at him, uncertain whether he wanted to laugh or slap sense into Barrett. He narrowed his eyes and asked, "Did someone suggest this course of action to you? Did my aunt say something, or

perhaps Redmond?"

Barrett suddenly looked uncertain. "I came to the conclusion on my own this afternoon," he confessed, "when you were conversing with Sophia before the tennis match. And when you refused my desire for you..." He let the sentence drop and his arms and shoulders with it.

A hint of a grin twitched at the corner of Anthony's mouth. "I regretted my refusal this afternoon almost as soon as it was made," he said quietly, sliding his hand up Barrett's arm to his shoulder. "And now I regret that I have worked so hard to be amiable with houseguests I did not want and whose presence has caused so much more harm than I could have imagined. I would say that I regret being so amiable with your sister, but she is *your* sister, and I could never regret showing kindness to anyone or anything connected to you, my darling." The term of endearment felt both awkward and perfect, like a shoe that had yet to be broken in, but would be as comfortable as a second skin once it was familiar.

Barrett's expression softened, and he leaned into Anthony. "What are you saying?" he asked, then attempted to answer himself with, "That I invented the whole thing out of insecurity, fear, and a passion for you that has gone unanswered for too long?"

Anthony smiled in spite of the bristling tension of the situation. "I have said before, and I stand by my words, that I have no intention of remarrying. Remarrying *anyone*, even your charming sister. Because I have already discovered the love of my life, and I would not do anything that might force me to give him up. But I have also discovered that I am rubbish at love affairs, because I do not have the slightest idea—"

Barrett cut him off by grasping Anthony's face in his hands and rushing out with, "I love you too," and bringing his mouth crashing over Anthony's.

In a burst of joy and pleasure, every misunderstanding of the past few days and every external complication melted away. Anthony threw his arms around his lover and held him close, moaning deep in his throat and kissing Barrett as though his soul depended on it. Unlike the kiss of the night before, this one was fiery and aggressive. A week without passion had been entirely too much, and Anthony wanted everything from Barrett in as great a quantity as he could get. He threaded his fingers through Barrett's hair and sucked his tongue into his mouth so that he could lavish it with the sort of attention he wanted to give to other parts of Barrett's body. In turn, Barrett grasped a large handful of his arse and pressed their hips together, both of their cocks responding eagerly.

"I've missed you," Barrett gasped between kisses, tugging at

Anthony's buttons and attempting to push his jacket off his shoulders.

"I love you," Anthony told him in return, grasping Barrett's erection through the fabric of his breeches.

Barrett made a sound of desperate approval and slammed his mouth into Anthony's again, groping him shamelessly.

Which was precisely the position Lady Sophia found them in when she marched around the corner into the room and said, "Barrett, I saw you steal away in here, and I've come to tell you I will not wait—"

That was as far as she got before her jaw dropped open and her eyes went wide at the sight of her brother and the man she wanted to marry in a scandalously passionate embrace.

The flash of lightning and clap of thunder that followed moments after Sophia discovered Barrett and Anthony in a carnal embrace could not have been planned more perfectly if Shakespeare himself had written the play. Barrett was far slower to leap out of Anthony's arms than he should have been, mostly because Anthony's arms were the place he wanted to be most in the world, particularly after the misunderstandings of the past week. But his sister's eyes had gone wide with shock, and she'd clapped a hand to her mouth.

"Sophia, I can explain," Barrett insisted, taking a step toward her.

"I do not wish for an explanation," she said, her voice tense with anger, dropping her hand from her mouth and balling her fist. "I do not believe you could give me one I would accept."

"Anthony and I are in love," he said anyhow, taking another step toward her. "It is part of the reason I advised you against pursuing him in marriage."

"This is intolerable," Sophia growled, glaring at Barrett. She hovered on her spot for a moment, her face steadily turning an alarming shade of puce, then let out a frustrated grunt and turned to run out of the room.

"Sophia!" Barrett called after her. He took a few steps to pursue her, then twisted back to Anthony. "I have to catch her and convince her to see reason," he said. "And persuade her not to say a thing to anyone about this."

"I understand fully," Anthony said, his expression grave but his face bright red. "Go. You have my blessing."

Barrett rushed to him and kissed him soundly, his heart overflowing with sentiment in spite of the anxiety of the situation, then rushed out of the study.

Sophia hadn't made it far down the hall, and Barrett caught up with her easily. As soon as he did, he cupped her elbow and redirected her steps, leading her into one of the quieter family parlors near the end of the hall.

"You need to let me explain fully," he told her in a voice that brooked no argument.

"What is there to explain?" Sophia demanded, turning to face him

once they were deep within the room. "I was right in my assessment from the very start. You refused to press my suit with Malton because you wished to keep him for yourself." She laughed as though the whole thing were ridiculous and painful. "But of course I see it now. I have seen it all along but not known what I was observing. The way the two of you look at each other when you think no one is aware, the small touches, the way gravity seems to draw the two of you into the same room or the same conversations within a room." She pressed her fingertips to her forehead and shook her head. "It is obvious to me now that the two of you are intimately attached."

Barrett winced slightly and rolled his shoulders uncomfortably. "What do you know of such things?" he asked, dreading the answer.

Sophia sent him a stare so flat Barrett was surprised it did not level him. "I've just been in London for the past four months, Barrett. And I am not some babe in a basket." Barrett lifted his brow at her unusual metaphor. "What do you think ladies discuss amongst themselves while they are scrutinizing the men of the *ton* and assessing the worth of potential husband? I am well aware that it is popular to believe so, but do you honestly think we are all ignorant, innocent misses with no concept of what goes on after the marriage vows are spoken, be it blissful happiness or sordid affairs?"

Barrett's mouth dropped open, but he had no idea how to respond. Sophia was his younger sister, a girl he'd watched play with dolls and giggle at the puppet shows he and Henry had staged for her. He'd never truly thought of her as a grown woman with a mind of her own and knowledge of the forbidden until then. "Things are seldom as they seem," was all he could come up with in response.

As if to agree with him, thunder sounded from outside. Sophia didn't seem at all pleased with his answer, though.

"You seem to think this is all some sort of joke, that a woman's knowledge of anything but dancing and household management is inconsequential, but we need to be aware of how affairs are conducted to preserve our very lives," she insisted. "So yes, I have at least some notion of what you and Malton are up to, and it is bitterly unfair." She stomped her foot with a miserable, embittered look as she did.

Barrett blinked, as those were not the emotions he would have expected his sister to display when discovering his peculiarity. "Unfair?" he asked.

Sophia looked at him in utter despair. "You are able to get away with so much more than I ever will," she said, gesturing to him in annoyance. "You are able to shock our parents by running away to join the navy instead of attending them at home. You are able to ensconce yourself at a duke's country house and to fall in love with him and he with you, and no one will whisper a word about it. You

are able to carry on with a man in his study in a way that should be reserved for a bedroom without damaging your reputation irreparably should you be discovered. I can do none of those things.”

“I hardly think Anthony and I would escape without a scratch if things come to be known,” Barrett argued.

“If you think that, you are wrong,” Sophia insisted. “Wait. Watch. It will happen, and though eyebrows will be raised, you will still be accepted by society. If I so much as wear the wrong feathers to Almack’s, my standing with the *ton* will be destroyed. All I wanted to do was marry well so that I am no longer forced to be a part of that display of snobbery and hypocrisy.”

“Soph,” Barrett said, his heart breaking for his sister, “I did not know.”

He took a step toward her, but Sophia reeled back, raising her arms defensively. “No, I want nothing to do with this anymore. It is unfair in the extreme.” She stepped around Barrett, heading for the door. “I refuse to accept that only men can commit scandalous acts to secure their own happiness. If you can take an unconventional lover, then I can take my future into my own hands to live the life I want.”

“I’m certain you can, dearest, but—”

“No,” Sophia cut him off. “I will not have you big brothering your way into my life and my affairs anymore. I wish to be happy, so I will achieve that happiness on my own terms.”

She turned and fled the room with a scowl of determination that would have struck fear into the heart of even the fiercest of privateers Barrett had faced in his naval encounters. It worried him more than he wanted to admit, but he hadn’t the slightest clue what to do about it.

His first instinct was to chase after her, but in Sophia’s current mood, he wasn’t certain that was what she wanted. His second impulse was to let the whole thing go and to allow Sophia to contend with her frustrations on her own. She might have been his sister, but the idea that it was his duty to put her in her place—or to help her find a better place—rankled him. It all came back to duty, that harsh taskmaster. Was it his duty to make himself as miserable as Sophia was so that he could futilely battle things about society that would never change by her side?

He rejected the notion, pacing around the room instead, puzzling over what he should do. He walked to the window and glanced out at the storm, which seemed to be reaching some sort of a pitch. With any luck, it would be like the storm they’d experienced the night before, over and done within an hour, leaving the world a beautiful place in its wake. With any luck, his storm with Sophia would blow over just as quickly. Sophia was strong, beautiful, and the most admirable woman Barrett had ever met. With a pang in his chest that seemed to

crack past the wall of insolence he'd been hiding behind, he knew what he had to do. He had to make things right for her because, yes, it was his duty, but also because he loved her. And when combined with love, duty wasn't a beast, it was a blessing.

He started out of the room with renewed energy and purpose, hoping Sophia hadn't gone far. No sooner had he stepped into the hallway than he nearly ran headlong into Overton.

"Oh, Lord Copeland, there you are," Overton said, his usual cheeriness somewhat marred. "Could I have a word?"

"I regret that there is not time," Barrett said.

He attempted to step around the man, but Overton moved into his path. "It is about your sister, sir."

That captured Barrett's attention. "Did you see her just now?"

"I did," he said, his concern growing. "I attempted to question her about why she was so upset and to ask whether there was anything I could do to help her, but she was too overwrought."

Barrett's chest tightened. If Sophia was upset, it was his fault. He should have been there for her sooner. "I will speak to her at once," he said, starting for the stairs and hoping one of the maids would be on hand to tell him which room was his sister's.

"That is the thing, my lord," Overton said, following her. "I believe she has left the house."

Barrett stopped and turned to Overton in alarm. "Tonight? Just now? In this storm?"

"I believe so," Overton said, his distress shining through. "I thought you should know at once."

"Thank you," Barrett said, leaping into motion, but heading back toward the study instead of the front hall.

"Can I help in any way, my lord?" Overton asked.

"Yes. Have my coat and Malton's fetched at once and meet us at the front door," Barrett called over his shoulder as he marched on.

Overton nodded and scurried off. Barrett rushed back to the study, intent on informing Anthony about what had happened and enlisting his help to go after Sophia.

But when he rounded the corner, Anthony was not alone in his study. Lady Grosmont was with him, and she was in high dudgeon.

"I will not hear any of this," Lady Grosmont said, her voice raised, shaking as she glared at Anthony. "You have a duty, boy, and you will perform it."

"Madam, I have performed that duty," Anthony insisted. "I have married and produced two of the most perfect children who have ever graced the earth. My obligations in that area have been fulfilled."

"It is unseemly for a man to remain unmarried when he has so much to offer a wife," Lady Grosmont argued with conviction. "You

are denying some fine woman the chance to call herself a duchess and to manage your household for you."

"My household is well-managed on its own," Anthony told her. "Or are you suggesting that I should bring an unnecessary woman into my life so that you may take credit for discovering a duchess and setting her up in society?"

Lady Grosmont seemed to ignore his question. "I have gone to great lengths to organize this party and to invite the finest guests available on short notice. I have provided you with a splendid variety of well-bred young ladies to choose from. Your children need a mother's influence, Anthony. They are on the verge of becoming peculiar the way you have chosen to raise and educate them."

"Is *that* your concern?" Anthony gaped at her. "That Francis and Eliza will grow up to have their own minds and their own opinions about things?"

"That is one of my many concerns, yes," Lady Grosmont huffed in irritation. "Your children do not conform to the way children should be. And your methods of managing this estate, which was once my home, are shocking. My brother would never have rearranged the fields, as you've proposed to do. And selling off a portion of the land? It is preposterous."

"When did you hear about that?" Anthony asked her.

Lady Grosmont had the decency to at least look sheepish as she admitted, "I wheedled the information out of Worthington. Your father would never have allowed any of the things you have done. He would have been so bitterly disappointed in you."

In the slight pause that followed, Barrett stepped in with, "Anthony, an extraordinarily pressing matter has arisen. We must make haste."

Anthony was still fixed on his aunt, though. With a somewhat wounded look, he said, "Are you telling me that everything I have done to manage and grow my estate, all of the education and opportunities I have attempted to provide for my children, everything I have done to improve the lives of my tenants and staff, in short, all of the ways I have striven to do my duty have not met with your approval?"

"Of course not," Lady Grosmont snapped. "Because you are doing it all wrong. My brother would be appalled at the changes you have made and the missteps you have made in carrying out your duties."

Barrett sucked in a breath, wanting to fly to Anthony and throw his arms around the man then and there, Lady Grosmont or no Lady Grosmont. He could see just how heavily the irritating woman's blow had landed on Anthony's soul, could see in the way Anthony widened his eyes in shock that everything he'd held dear had just been

undercut.

“There is nothing at all wrong in the way Anthony has carried out his duty toward his family or his estate,” Barrett said with all of the pride and love he felt for Anthony on display. He marched over to his lover’s side. “Perhaps he has not done things as you would have liked, my lady, but he has been a blessing to this estate and to all who are fortunate enough to know him. Anthony is the most upright and responsible man I know. The fact that he has not done things to specifications that you approve of does not mean he has not improved everything he has touched and made life better for so many. And his children are some of the finest young people I know.”

Lady Grosmont balked, pressing a hand to her chest as though Barrett had mortally offended her. “And who are you to make these pronouncements to me, sir?” she demanded.

Barrett held his breath. Anthony could have answered in a dozen different ways that would either reveal all to a woman—who most certainly would not react as circumspectly as Sophia had, when all was said and done—or he could diminish Barrett to the role of mere guest, which Barrett would not fault him for in the least.

Anthony glanced to Barrett with a wealth of affection and gratitude in his eyes. He stood straighter, squared his shoulders, and stared his aunt firmly in the eye. More than that, he reached for Barrett’s hand, threading his fingers with Barrett’s. “Madam, Barrett is —”

“I have the coats,” Overton announced as he skittered into the doorway, his arms filled with coats and hats, Winters trailing behind him. “We’d best be off as swiftly as possible, since the storm seems to be picking up instead of abating.”

Barrett pulled his hand out of Anthony’s so that he could stride across the room to retrieve his coat. “Thank you,” he told Overton hurriedly. He then turned back to a highly confused Anthony and Lady Grosmont to say, “Sophia has apparently taken it upon herself to run off in the night in the middle of the storm, like a gothic heroine. We must go after her and bring her back before any serious harm comes to her.”

Anthony’s expression immediately flashed to alarm, and he marched forward. “How long has she been gone?” he asked. The look he sent Barrett did more than ask that question. It thanked him for being present at a moment when he’d been needed and apologized for the disaster that might have unfolded if things had turned out differently.

“Not more than twenty minutes,” Overton said.

“Yes,” Lady Grosmont said with extreme relief that felt very wrong to Barrett. “Chase after her, Anthony. Show yourself to be a hero and

rescue her. Then do your duty—correctly, for once—and propose to that woman once you have her safe and sound.”

Barrett exchanged a look with Anthony as they donned their coats and rushed out of the study that said they would have more than one dramatic confrontation before the night was over.

Almost from the moment the three of them rushed out into the driving rain and occasional thunder and lightning of the storm, Anthony realized the task ahead of them was harder than it seemed.

"Which way did she go?" he shouted over the sound of the storm, crossing the drive to where several paths led away from the front of the house.

"I...I did not see," Overton confessed, hunkering into his coat and turning the collar up against the rain, much good that it would do. "She did have a lantern with her, though I'm not certain it will remain lit in this weather."

"The mad girl," Barrett hissed as he walked by Anthony's side. "This is all my fault."

"Did you say something to upset her?" Anthony asked, then immediately realized how silly a question that was. Of course Lady Sophia was upset. She'd walked in on him and Barrett in a passionate embrace. Considering where their hands had been, it was an embrace that could not be explained away as platonic.

Barrett peeked sideways at him, and for a moment lightning illuminated his face along with the light from the lanterns Winters had fetched for them. "She said it was unfair that we could get away with being scandalous but she could not, and she planned to take matters into her own hands."

"Her own hands again?" Anthony couldn't resist a morbid grin. The last time Lady Sophia had taken matters into her own hands, according to what Barrett had told him, was by securing a position as Aunt Georgiana's companion and invading Wodehouse Abbey. There was no telling what the formidable woman would do now. If not for the fact that Anthony was thoroughly and passionately in love with Barrett, he might have considered marrying Lady Sophia after all so that she could be an influence on Eliza.

"What have you done that is so very scandalous?" Overton asked before Barrett could answer. "This has been a perfectly delightful and scandal-free house party to my reckoning."

Anthony and Barrett exchanged a look but said nothing.

"She can't have gone far," Barrett said. "It was a fit of pique that

took her out of the house. She has no means to make it beyond the boundaries of the estate.”

“The orangery?” Anthony suggested. It was one of the few buildings close to the house where a woman could take shelter in a storm.

Barrett nodded his reply, and the three of them forged off along the path as the wind and rain swirled around them. They were soaked to the bone within minutes in spite of their coats, and judging by the way Anthony’s stockings squished in his boots, he had a bad feeling those boots would be useless after tonight. It was a blessing that their lanterns stayed lit, though the flames sputtered and cast less light than they usually would have.

They made it to the orangery and ducked inside for a moment of reprieve, but after a few calls of, “Sophia? Sophia, are you in here?” from Barrett, it was clear that she had not taken shelter in the glass building.

Another flash of lightning and answering roll of thunder followed, filling Anthony with a sense of doom. “There are other outbuildings where she might have sheltered,” he said. “There is a gardener’s shed, the boathouse down by the lake, the gamekeeper’s cottage in the woods.”

“Would she have gone so far from the house in such a storm?” Overton asked.

“She would go as far as her ire and determination held out,” Barrett said with a sigh, heading for the orangery door and back into the storm.

“What was it that upset her to such a point?” Overton asked, following.

Anthony quickly caught up to Barrett’s side and answered Overton’s question with, “I regrettably informed her that I have no intention of remarrying, now or ever.” It wasn’t entirely a lie. That was the message conveyed in the way Lady Sophia discovered him and Barrett.

“Oh,” Overton said with surprising good cheer. “Does that mean the way is clear for me now?”

Anthony’s mouth twitched in amusement at the man’s bold question, but Barrett answered him straight with, “Yes, and I believe this would be the ideal time to present your suit.”

Anthony nearly laughed aloud at that. The ideal time to present a suit of marriage was not in the middle of a summer storm when the lady in question was probably drenched, frightened, and desperate.

Then again, perhaps that was the perfect time after all.

“Is that her emerging from the woods?” Overton asked, pointing into the rain-soaked darkness.

Up ahead, the light of a single lantern shone in the distance. Hope rose in Anthony's chest. It transformed back into worry when they drew closer to the lantern to find that the person holding it was not Lady Sophia, but rather the estate's gamekeeper, young Declan Shelton. Declan was bundled up against the rain, and for the first time that Anthony had seen him in years, he did not have his faithful hawk companion perched on his arm or shoulder.

"Perhaps Declan knows something," Anthony called out to Barrett and Overton, picking up his pace. Knowing Declan was a man of few words, once they reached him, Anthony shouted, "Declan, have you any information about the whereabouts of one Lady Sophia Landers?"

Blessedly, Declan nodded and pointed back toward the woods. They all picked up their pace from there, hurrying across the open meadow and on into the trees, praying that lightning wouldn't strike them and that they would find Lady Sophia safe and dry, sooner rather than later.

The path took them deep into the woods—if a woods that small could be said to be deep—to the small gamekeeper's cottage. Once Declan let them inside, they found Lady Sophia drenched from head to toe, wrapped in a blanket and seated by the fireplace with a cup of tea, looking bedraggled and forlorn. As soon as she spotted them, she leapt to her feet with the energy of a wild animal that had been caught. As if to echo her movements, Declan's hawk leapt from its perch onto the young gamekeeper's arm.

"Barrett," Sophia said, guilt quickly creeping into her expression. "How did you find me?"

"How could I not find you, Sophia." Barrett handed his lantern off to Anthony and marched across the small, tidy space of the cottage to pull his sister into his arms. Sophia squealed at the embrace, her eyes going wide. "You had me so worried," Barrett said, genuine emotion in his voice.

"I must confess, I had myself a bit worried as well," she said, letting go of the blanket around her shoulders so that she could hug her brother in return.

Barrett tightened his embrace for a moment before holding her at arm's length. Without the blanket to shield her and with her gown soaking, very little of Lady Sophia's person was left to the imagination. Anthony noted with a grin that the sight did not tempt him in the least, but Lord Overton seemed to have been struck dumb by the sight. He gazed at Lady Sophia with dreamy eyes, as if seeing a vision of perfection. His amorousness made Anthony a bit jealous. It would have been pure delight if Barrett wasn't wearing a coat or a jacket and if the rain had plastered the man's shirt and breeches to his well-formed body.

"I will not apologize for my boldness," Lady Sophia said, tilting her chin up and pushing a strand of damp hair off her forehead. "Though I will apologize for making you worry, dear brother."

"No," Barrett said with a shake of his head. "It is I who should apologize, and for a great many things at that."

Anthony was as surprised by that statement as Lady Sophia was. "Whatever do you have to apologize for, Barry?" she asked. "Other than..." She gestured vaguely toward Anthony, which caused Overton's brow to crease in confusion.

"I have a lifetime to apologize for," Barrett said with a heartfelt sigh. He turned to send Anthony a regretful look. "Anthony, and everyone else who said as much, was right." He glanced to his sister again. "I should have been in London to assist you with your season. I should not have thought only of myself and my comfort after the war. I should not have flown off to join the navy and abandoned my duties to you and our family in the first place. In these last few weeks, Anthony has taught me more about what duty truly means and why it is something I should aspire to fulfill than I ever could have learned elsewhere. Anthony has taught me what it is to be a man." He glanced to Anthony once more with a look of deepest love.

Anthony's heart leapt in his chest. He would have flown across the room and captured his lover in an embrace that would have made the one Lady Sophia walked in on appear docile if Barrett didn't look as though he had more to say.

Before he could, however, Lady Sophia interrupted him. "Barrett, you were miserable before you left for the navy. All of us were well aware of it. The life Father set out for you was so desperately unsuited to your character. You needed adventure, and you needed to serve your country. Henry did quite well taking over the duties of the estate."

Barrett frowned at his sister. "I thought you were vexed with me for not being the man I should have been."

Lady Sophia made an undignified noise and thumped her brother's arm. "I was vexed with you for not attending me in London or introducing me to gentlemen of your acquaintance through the navy. Navigating the *ton* is by far more difficult than sailing the Atlantic. But that duty would have encompassed mere months. I would never dream of replotting the course of your life when you already know which activities you are suited for and which you are not."

Barrett's frown deepened. "I am confused. Are you angry with me or not?"

"I am angry with you for not helping me to find a husband and be settled in life," Lady Sophia said, making a fist and punching Barrett's arm with a playful scowl. "I am angry that you denied me your merry

company in favor of ensconcing yourself in a ducal estate so far from me. I do like you, Barry, and I enjoy spending time with you.”

“I like you too, Soph,” Barrett said, pulling her into another embrace. “And I promise I will spend time with you in years to come. I promise you I will find a way for you to be settled and not to have to worry about the *ton* and its cruel judgments ever again.”

“Perhaps I could help on that score?” Overton asked, stepping hesitantly forward.

Anthony wanted to reach out and pull the man back from making an utter arse of himself, but it was too late. He had already approached Lady Sophia, who stepped out of her brother’s arms to face him.

“Lady Sophia,” Overton began, “surely you must be aware of how ardently I admire you. I have from the first moment of our acquaintance.”

“You have been very kind and attentive, Lord Overton,” Sophia told him with a smile. If Anthony wasn’t mistaken, there was a hint of regret and fondness in Lady Sophia’s eyes, as though she recognized she had been unfair to the man.

“I am aware that our acquaintance has been brief, but brevity means nothing when the heart is certain of what it wants.” Overton dropped to one knee, as lovely and ridiculous as any hero in a romantic novel. “I have found you to be nothing but sweetness and wit, beauty and grace, from the start. I know I am not a duke, but I will be a marquess someday, and I have a rather charming estate of my own not far from here. I would be honored, not to mention the most fortunate man alive, if you were to consent to be my wife and my partner in all things in this adventure of life.”

Mad though it was, Anthony found himself tearing up at the passionate declaration. He glanced to Barrett, unsurprised to find that Barrett was smiling at him, almost to the point of making fun of him. Anthony could see Overton’s words echoed in Barrett’s eyes and the promises Overton had made radiating from him. It was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen, and he could not let the moment go unmarked.

“I am sorry that I could not be the man you wished me to be, Lady Sophia,” he said taking a step toward Barrett, who had moved to the side to make way for Overton. “I regret that I could never love you the way you wished I would. The fact is, I have found the one I love and who I will love for the remainder of my days. I have found him where and when I least expected him and in the most unlikely of guises. But I have most definitely and most passionately found him.” He closed the distance between him and Barrett and took Barrett’s hands.

“Oh?” Overton stumbled, then pushed himself clumsily to his feet,

gaping at Anthony and Barrett. A moment later, his tone changed to one of discovery as he repeated the same syllable, but with an entirely different intonation. "Ohh!"

Anthony ignored him. "I love you, Barrett," he went on. "And you cannot know how deeply I regret letting anything come between the two of us, most particularly this phantom of duty that I have been chasing my entire life."

A wave of grief and disappointment washed over him as he remembered his conversation with his aunt from no more than an hour before. He lowered his head, staring at his and Barrett's joined hands.

"You heard Aunt Georgiana. All of my efforts, all of the things I have poured my heart out for, everything I have done at the expense of my own happiness, it has all been for naught." He raised his head to meet Barrett's eyes. "She does not approve of any of it and she never has. Worse still, she has said my father wouldn't approve either. Have I wasted my entire life striving for a goal I was never going to achieve?"

"No," Barrett answered vehemently, letting go of Anthony's hands to clasp his upper arms. "You have done beautifully, my darling. You have given everything you have selflessly for the betterment of those around you, those you care about. It detracts from nothing that you chose to do that in your own way instead of merely following in the worn footsteps of those who came before you. What you have done is precisely what I have always dreamed of doing, making a life for yourself and those you love on your own terms. I was a fool not to see that was your point and your purpose all along, not acting as a slave to duty."

"So you no longer think I am a bloodless automaton, burying my true feelings for the sake of bolstering others?" Anthony asked with a sly grin.

Barrett laughed. "I think you are the noblest, most perfect man I have ever met, and I want nothing more than to spend the rest of my life teasing and goading you, learning what it means to be a man from you, and filling your days and nights with all of the joy and pleasure I fear you will forget to give yourself without me by your side."

"I will forget," Anthony said with a sudden laugh born out of the abundance of bliss coursing through him. "And I do need you with me. Say you will stay and be mine for the rest of our lives, no matter what others say. The children, Red, and our friends approve, and theirs are the only opinions that matter to me now."

"Of course I will stay with you," Barrett said, moving his hands to clasp Anthony's face, then leaning in for a kiss.

It was searing and beautiful, and deeply shocking, considering they

were being watched. Anthony couldn't bring himself to care, though. His heart felt too light, and his body buzzed with eagerness like he hadn't felt for a week.

"Good Lord," Overton declared, startling Anthony and Barrett out of their kiss. Instead of berating them or objecting, however, he wore a smile. "That puts my proposal to shame, I'm afraid. Lady Sophia, I rescind my offer."

"I beg your pardon?" Lady Sophia said, the color suddenly draining from her face. She stared at Overton with wide, anxious eyes.

Overton reached for her hands and held them close to his heart. "My lady, your brother and his duke have made me reconsider the depth of my affections. I humbly beg your leave to allow me to court and woo you for a longer time, perhaps the remainder of the summer. Let me shower you with affection and attention and come to know you as deeply as these two gentlemen know each other. And once the bud of fondness I feel for you has blossomed into a perfect rose of love, allow me to make another proposal to you that will outshine even this impressive declaration of love that we have just witnessed."

Anthony's brow shot up. Barrett seemed shocked beyond words as well. Young Declan, who had watched the entire scene in his usual silence, his hawk now perched on his shoulder, smiled and turned his head to wink at the hawk as though the two of them had known how the scene would unfold all along.

Lady Sophia let out a startled, "Oh," and blinked. "You mean to say that you still wish to woo me, knowing my brother...and the Duke of Malton?"

Overton glanced over his shoulder at Anthony and Barrett, then shrugged. "Some of my closest friends prefer other men to women. It was widely accepted in certain circles at university, so why shouldn't I accept it now? Particularly as it means I need not worry about Malton stealing you away from me."

Lady Sophia's expression brightened, and she clapped a hand to her mouth to stifle the laugh that bubbled out of her. "Then yes, of course, Lord Overton. I would be delighted to accept your proposal to spend the summer wooing me."

Overton leaned closer to her and said, "You can call me Baldrick, you know," with a wink.

"Yes, Baldrick," Lady Sophia said, then surprised them all, Overton included, by throwing her arms around Overton's shoulders and kissing him soundly.

Anthony exchanged a wide-eyed look with Barrett. "Something tells me we may have to arrange for a wedding to take place sooner than the end of the summer, if this sort of behavior persists."

"Passion runs in the family," Barrett answered with a salacious

wink, reaching out to brush a few lingering raindrops from Anthony's ear.

Anthony suddenly couldn't get back to the house fast enough. He had an aunt and a house full of guests to dismiss and a lover to take to his bed so that he could show Barrett just how much he'd missed him.

The house was in a surprising state of uproar when Barrett, Anthony, Sophia, and Overton returned. The storm had finally abated, so they were able to make their soggy way across the grounds with relative ease, although there was little chance of salvaging the clothing of all four of them. As they stepped through the front door and into the grand foyer, dripping as though they'd all dunked themselves in the lake, they were greeted by Worthington, Winters, Lady Grosmont, Red, Septimus and Adam, half of the houseguests, and most surprisingly of all, Eliza and Francis in their nightclothes. Barrett had never seen such a sight in his life. It was as though their foursome had made an entrance onto a stage with the audience waiting before them.

"Oh, Papa!" Eliza exclaimed, breaking away from Ivy—who was arguing determinedly with Lady Grosmont—and flying across the front hall to throw her arms around Anthony, regardless of his drenched state. "I was so worried. First the storm upset me, then Francis and I could not find you when we looked for you, then Aunt Georgiana said to go back to bed, then Worthington said you went outside, *and then* Francis said you might have been struck by lightning, and—" Her entire explanation was spoken in one increasingly fast gasp, and when she reached the end, she was forced to catch her breath.

"All is well, my darling," Anthony said, laughing and hugging Eliza to him, as heedless of his state as she was. Worthington had stepped up to take everyone's sodden coats, and Anthony managed to shrug out of his while simultaneously lavishing his daughter with affection.

"We were frightened," Francis added, joining his sister in clinging to Anthony. It was clear the boy had been in tears, which shot straight to Barrett's heart.

"There is no need to be frightened, my darlings," Anthony said, kissing each of their heads in turn. "I will always return to you when I go out, you have my word." He glanced up to Barrett as he finished, implying that Barrett was included in the promise.

Not to be outdone, Barrett addressed the children with, "You will never have to worry about your papa when he is with me. I shall take

care of him as though he were my own.” The words were for Anthony as much as for Francis and Eliza.

The children beamed up at Barrett, and Eliza shifted to embrace him, but before she could say anything, Siggleshorpe burst out with, “Absolutely beautiful,” from the side of the rapt audience.

All eyes shifted to him for a moment, and Barrett had a nearly impossible time keeping a straight face. Siggleshorpe’s neckcloth was undone, and his clothes were just askew enough to be noticeable. His cheeks were flushed and his mouth a bit redder than was seemly. One of the young gentlemen who Lady Grosmont had invited to the house party stood near him looking equally disheveled, but the man quickly separated himself from Siggleshorpe and crept off down a side hall as soon as the peacock drew everyone’s attention.

The absurd moment brought the emotion of the foursome’s return to an awkward halt, but Lady Grosmont pushed the whole thing into motion again as she stepped forward, a bright smile on her face.

“Is it true? Could it be?” she asked, her eyes shining with excitement as she glanced between Anthony and Sophia. The two were standing near each other purely by accident, and Overton hovered over Sophia as though he could chase away any risk that Sophia would catch a catarrh, but that didn’t stop the resolute woman from drawing her own conclusions. “Do we have a match after all?” she went on. “Was there, perhaps, a dramatic and romantic scene in which deepest affection and admiration was expressed and an engagement made?”

Anthony’s expression hardened with tired irritation, but it was Overton who stepped forward to say, “Yes, my lady, in fact, such a declaration was made.”

Lady Grosmont was slow to realize what she was being told. She clapped her hands together and held them over her heart, still gazing at Anthony and Sophia. “Oh, how delightful.”

Ignoring her, Overton reached for Sophia’s hand, drawing her close. “I have confessed to Lady Sophia how fond of her I am and how it is my sincerest wish to woo her passionately so that, by the end of the summer, she will consent to be my wife.”

“And I have accepted Lord Overton’s delightful proposal,” Sophia declared, beaming up at him. “I do believe my darling Baldrick will receive a favorable answer to his question in a few months’ time, and that we will both enjoy the path to that question.”

Lady Grosmont’s joy tumbled into a confused scowl. “I beg your pardon?” she asked. “You are to marry my nephew, the Duke of Malton.”

“Madam, as I have said *numerous* times,” Anthony said, stepping forward, Francis clinging to his side, “I have no inclination to remarry.

My life is perfect bliss just as it is.” He scrubbed a hand through Francis’s hair, then glanced to Barrett and Eliza with a look so blatantly affectionate that even the slowest dolt in their audience must have interpreted it.

“But this cannot be,” Lady Grosmont huffed. “A duke should be married. He should be an example to those around him and a paragon of virtue.”

“Your nephew is all those things,” Barrett stepped in, unable to stand by any longer. “He is the most upright and responsible man I have ever known. It may not be a popular opinion, but I believe he is an example to those around him by caring for his responsibilities and himself together. He has shown me what it is to be a dutiful brother, and I believe over the years he will teach me how to be a careful steward of the responsibilities that have been entrusted to me as well.” He hugged Eliza closer as he finished, feeling in his soul that Anthony’s children were somehow his responsibility now as well. He was determined to make their lives as happy and whole as he could.

“But this...this is not...something about this is very odd indeed,” Lady Grosmont said, pressing her lips together in consternation.

“There is nothing odd about it at all, Aunt Georgiana,” Red said, stepping up behind his aunt and resting a hand on her back. He winked at Anthony and Barrett, then said, “Your nephews are happy. Your grandniece and grandnephew are as well. I should think you would be overflowing with bliss knowing that.”

“I...I suppose so.” Lady Grosmont let out a breath, frowning. “I was so hoping to be able to declare this house party a success.”

“But it is a success, my lady,” Sophia said, stepping away from Overton so she could take the woman’s hand. “I never would have found Overton without you.”

“And, if I may,” Lord Spalding spoke up from near the back of the throng of guests watching them, “Lady Constance and I have reached an understanding as well.”

“Truly?” Lady Sylvia asked from the other side of the pack of guests.

Lady Constance stood on her toes so that she could face her friend across the crowd. “Truly,” she answered with a wide smile. “I wanted to tell you, but you’ve been so vexed with me.”

“And I wanted to tell you about Mr. Pattinson’s attentions to me, but I thought you never wanted to speak to me again,” Lady Sylvia called back.

“Never, my friend.”

The two young ladies broke away from the groups where they stood and pushed and elbowed their way through the crowd to reach each other and embrace.

"We shall never exchange cross words again," Lady Constance said, blinking back tears as she clasped her friend's hands.

"And we shall be bridesmaids at each other's weddings," Lady Sylvia declared.

Barrett sent Anthony a look of barely contained humor. Anthony glanced back at him, his eyes wide with surprise and mirth. What they'd expected to be a moment of intense revelation fraught with peril had turned into a scene worthy of the conclusion of a comedic play. Since few eyes were anywhere near them, Barrett reached out for Anthony's hand, threading their fingers together and squeezing.

"You see, Aunt Georgina?" Red said with a laugh. "Your machinations have been successful after all. I dare say you will receive quite a few invitations to help fine ladies and gentlemen throughout England to plan the guest lists for their parties from now on." Red raised his aunt's hand to his lips and kissed it with a rakish wink.

"I suppose," Lady Grosmont said wearily.

"I know it," Red told her.

"And with that," Anthony said, raising his voice and letting go of Barrett's hand so that he could take a step forward, "I regret to announce that this house party has come to an end. I have enjoyed hosting you all very much, but in light of recent events, I would humbly ask that you return to your own homes on the morrow so that I can have mine to myself to enjoy with my family." He grinned sideways at Barrett as he spoke. Barrett had never felt more included in a family grouping in his life. Anthony turned back to Lady Grosmont and said, "I trust you will want to accompany your companion, Lady Sophia, to your own estate, madam, which I believe is adjacent to Lord Overton's familial estate, to serve as chaperone in the wooing that is to come."

A light of inspiration settled in Lady Grosmont's eyes. "Yes, of course," she said. "I do believe Lord Overton has an unmarried sister as well. I wonder who might suit for Lady Estelle."

That was the end of the climactic scene in Wodehouse Abbey's front hall. Barrett had a distinct feeling that Lady Grosmont's guests would be talking about the scene for months to come, perhaps years.

"And now," Anthony said, stepping back to where Barrett stood with the children, "it is time to put the lot of you to bed." The smile he shared with Barrett was entirely different from the one he shared with his children.

"I can take the children back up to the nursery, Your Grace," Ivy said, her cheeks pink and her eyes bright with the excitement of everything she'd just witnessed.

"Oh, but Papa and Barrett should tuck us in," Eliza said, glancing hopefully between Barrett and Anthony.

“You know I would, my darling,” Anthony said, hugging her. “But as I am certain you have observed, Barrett and I are drenched to the bone and must see to our own persons this evening.”

“But I promise we will spend the entire day tomorrow doing whatever you’d like to make up for having Ivy tuck you in tonight,” Barrett added.

The children moaned in complaint, but went along with Ivy, a spring in their steps that hinted they were looking forward to the next day.

Barrett and Anthony followed after them. “Are you certain you do not wish to spend the morrow engaged in another kind of activity?” Barrett asked in a low voice.

Anthony laughed. “I would absolutely prefer to spend our day that way, but we do owe it to the children. Aside from tonight, I feel as though we’ve neglected them terribly throughout the house party.”

Barrett’s insides felt buoyant at Anthony’s use of the word “we”. “Let’s never throw a house party again,” he said, taking Anthony’s hand as they headed up the stairs.

Winters—who had witnessed the entire, mad scene in the hall—followed, but as soon as they reached the door to Anthony’s room, Anthony turned to him and said, “I do not think I require your assistance this evening, Winters,” with a rakish look that was entirely unlike him. Barrett loved the spark and the mischief in Anthony’s eyes and noted to himself to spark that look in Anthony as much as he could in the future.

“Understood, Your Grace,” Winters said with a bow and a blush.

As soon as Barrett and Anthony were alone in the shelter of Anthony’s room—which Barrett very easily thought of as their room now—they slipped right into each other’s arms. Their clothes were still wet through and clung to them, making it more difficult to work through buttons and peel away layers, but Barrett hardly cared. All of the efforts he made to undress Anthony, and for Anthony to undress him, as they stole kisses and pressed against each other, groping and caressing, was worth the waiting they’d been forced to endure to get there.

“I thought I would go mad for want of touching you,” Anthony said once he’d finally thrown aside enough of Barrett’s clothes to slide his hands along the bare flesh of Barrett’s stomach and sides.

“Never again,” Barrett growled before slanting his mouth over Anthony’s and kissing him until his head was spinning. He never wanted to go without the heat of Anthony’s body or the taste of his tongue ever again.

Their frantic undressing moved across the room toward the bed. Each new item that was dropped made a squelching sound as it hit the

floor. Barrett would have worried about permanently staining Anthony's carpet, but too many other things demanded his attention, including Anthony's pert nipples and the bulge that filled out his breeches. He backed Anthony against the bed, leaning to capture one of his nipples in his mouth to tease it with his tongue. His patience for that lasted only a moment before he continued down to his knees to undo the falls of Anthony's breeches.

Anthony made a sound of blissful approval as Barrett peeled the wet fabric of his breeches down and drew his cock out. Anthony was a sight to behold, thick and long with the slightest upward curve. Barrett stroked his hand along his lover's length, as if he could make Anthony even harder than he already was. With his other hand, he cupped Anthony's balls, tugging them gently and eliciting a moan from Anthony, before slipping his fingers back to tease the bits between Anthony's balls and hole.

"How could I ever have lived without this?" Anthony groaned, threading his fingers through Barrett's hair.

"I truly do not know," Barrett laughed, "but you'll never have to live without it for the rest of your life."

He stifled any reply Anthony might have made by closing his mouth around the head of Anthony's cock and licking the trace of moisture off of his tip. Anthony made a strangled sound and fisted his hands in Barrett's wet hair as Barrett continued his gentle teasing for a moment, then bore down on Anthony. His years of practice meant he could take Anthony all the way to the back of his throat, which had Anthony shouting with pleasure. That vocal enjoyment fired Barrett's blood, as did the idea that, in time, he could teach Anthony how to swallow him just as deeply.

"Stop, stop," Anthony panted after less than a minute. "I'm so close, and I don't want it to end so soon."

Barrett obeyed, feeling dangerously close to the edge himself, and stood. "Who says it has to end?" he asked, leaning in for a kiss.

Anthony moaned into the kiss and fumbled with Barrett's breeches. "It never has to end," he panted when they both came up for breath. "But after the day we've had, I doubt I will be good for more than one go tonight," he said with an impish flicker of one eyebrow.

"Is that a threat or a challenge?" Barrett asked, leaning in for another kiss.

It was a scintillating thought, but the momentum of their passionate dance was interrupted by the necessity of removing boots, breeches, and stockings, then bowing to responsibility and picking up their sodden clothes to lay them over a rack near the fire so that they had a chance of drying and being salvaged.

Once they finally tumbled into bed together, the last of the

dampness drying from their bodies thanks to the heat they generated themselves, retrieving the jar of lubricant from the bedside table so that it would be ready when needed, Barrett said, "I propose we spend the rest of our lives in the nude so that we needn't worry about the fuss of undressing ever again."

Anthony laughed loudly, rolling Barrett to his back and wedging himself between his legs. "I think Winters might object, as attending to my wardrobe is his most treasured duty toward me." He bent to kiss Barrett's shoulder and neck, peppering him with kisses and moving lower so that he could lave one of Barrett's nipples. At the same time, he stroked a hand around Barrett's backside and lifted his thigh, leading Barrett to wrap his legs around Anthony's waist.

"Yes, we must consider Winters," Barrett said teasingly, raking his fingertips up Anthony's back and threading them through his hair. "God, I've missed this," he added with an impassioned moan.

"So have I," Anthony panted, then kissed his way back up Barrett's chest to his mouth. He kissed Barrett deeply, then reached between them to fist their cocks together. Barrett vocalized his pleasure and jerked into Anthony's hand, but just as the promise of bliss began to blossom, Anthony stopped and held himself above Barrett. "You won't ever leave, will you?" he asked with just a hint of vulnerability. "I have been serious every time I've said I want you to stay with me and the children always. If I could propose marriage to you, I would."

"Who says you cannot?" Barrett asked, bubbling with pleasure and love.

Anthony tilted his head to the side to think about it, then grinned and looked squarely at Barrett again. "Barrett Landers, would you do me the honor of becoming my replacement duchess?"

Barrett laughed out loud and reached for Anthony's face. He cupped his lover's beautiful face, rough with stubble in a way that excited him and made his cock twitch, and drew him down for a kiss. "Absolutely," he said, beaming up at Anthony. "As long as you will be my viscountess."

Anthony raised one eyebrow. "That's quite a step down for me, you know."

Barrett could barely contain the giddiness he felt inside, or the bone-deep need to have Anthony pound into him until they were both mindless with pleasure. "Think of it this way, my love. Someday you will be a countess."

"Well, if that is the case," Anthony laughed, then dipped down to capture Barrett's mouth in a searing kiss.

It was heaven in every possible way. The heat of their bodies together, the touch of skin against skin, the way their hands explored and claimed each other, and above all, the kisses that joined their

souls as well as their mouths. It was everything Barrett could have asked for and more, and when Anthony reached for the jar so that he could slick both his own cock and Barrett's, Barrett could hardly keep still in his need for completion. Everything in his life and his world was complete now that he had Anthony. For the rest of his days, his primary duty would be to Anthony and the family they created together. And with any luck, someday soon that family might extend to Sophia, Overton, and their children.

Those thoughts flew swiftly out of Barrett's head as Anthony hooked his arms under Barrett's knees, lifted his hips up, and pressed into him as though he'd been making love to men his whole life instead of just learning how it was done. Barrett let out a wordless cry of pleasure as his body stretched and gave to accept Anthony's full length, then tightened around him once he was balls-deep to give them both the most friction possible. Anthony's face pinched with an expression of pleasure that was almost comical as he began to thrust, slowly and methodically at first, then with more and more aggression and determination. It was maddeningly perfect, and Barrett found himself making sounds he would have been embarrassed to let out with any other partner from his past. He didn't hold back one bit with Anthony, though. His lover would never judge him for making love with abandon. Anthony would never judge him for anything.

The pleasure escalated quickly. Watching Anthony's enjoyment as he mastered him so thoroughly was as good as the pleasure Barrett felt himself. He wrapped his hand around his own prick and fisted himself when he felt Anthony was close to coming. Anthony watched him in turn, his eyes dilated with pleasure, and with surprisingly precise timing, Anthony let out a gasp of pleasure as he climaxed, and mere seconds later, Barrett erupted over his chest and belly as well. They fueled each other's orgasms in a way Barrett had never experienced, causing the whole thing to last longer and be sweeter than he'd ever known.

When it was done, the two of them collapsed into a spent pile together, arms and legs entwined. They were both damp with sweat instead of rain now, and both of them panted for breath as the high of the moment receded slowly. Even when the initial ecstasy passed, Barrett felt as light and happy as he could possibly be. He rolled to his side, pulling Anthony into an embrace with him.

"I love you, my noble duke," he said breathlessly, brushing a damp strand of hair back from Anthony's forehead and gazing on him like he was a work of art.

"And I love you, my beautiful lover," Anthony smiled in return. "For now and for always."



I HOPE you have enjoyed Barrett and Anthony's story! And good for them for finding love in the middle of a crowded house party! As an introvert, the idea of a house party of that size makes me shiver a little, but they were a popular way for young people to be introduced to each other and to spend time together in the Regency. Being invited to a summer house party could change a young person's life.

One other minor detail I wanted to point out that featured in this story... As a student of History, one popular misconception that never fails to make me cringe is the mistaken belief that there was no concept of hygiene in the 19th century, that no one ever bathed, and that everyone stank. That simply isn't true! I am a big fan of social history and anthropology and an admirer of the work of social historians Judith Flanders and Ruth Goodman. In their various works, both of these academics point out that, in fact, people bathed daily in the past, they just didn't necessarily do it by filling up a bathtub and soaking for a half hour or so. Sponge-baths were a part of the daily routine for most people, often twice a day. And as for the smell? It's just not in human nature to walk around all day knowing you stink. So why do modern people think that's the way life was? Because deodorant was not a commercially-market product until the end of the 19th century, it was something you whipped up at home. Domestic manuals and countless advice columns from the 18th and 19th century were filled with recipes for what were basically deodorants. Barrett's special mixture of lemon and alum is taken directly from one of the recipes Ruth Goodman talks about in her book *How to Be a Victorian*. Of course, the teeny, tiny little baby detail of a problem for some of these home deodorant recipes is that they were made with substances we now know to be carcinogenic or corrosive. Ouch!

SO WHAT'S next for the men of Wodehouse Abbey? How will things change once the crew from the Hawk arrive? Redmond will certainly be happy to see Lucas again—even though he is definitely, certainly, for sure not in love with Lucas. Lucas Salterford sees things differently, though. Can he woo Red once and for all? Find out next in *Games Lovers Play*.

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About the Author

Merry Farmer lives in suburban Philadelphia with her two cats, Justine and Peter. She has been writing since she was ten years old and realized she didn't have to wait for the teacher to assign a creative writing project to write something. It was the best day of her life. Her books have reached the top of Amazon's charts, and have been named finalists for several prestigious awards, including the RONE Award for indie romance.

